The Seine Mystery

CLEVELAND MOFFETT

THE SEINE MYSTERY

THE SEINE MYSTERY

BY

CLEVELAND MOFFETT

AUTHOR OF
THROUGH THE WALL, ETC.

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

PUBLISHED IN U. S. A., 1925
BY DODD, MEAD & COMPANY, INC.

Published, June, 1925
Second Printing, August, 1925

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Six Candles	1
II	Marguerite	22
III	The Dark Corridor	41
IV	"In Case I Should be Drowned"	58
V	Blanche Launay	63
VI	The Taxi-Cab	77
VII	The Scarred Finger	83
VIII	Was it Our Duty to Speak?	94
IX	Emil Bigot	99
X	Under Seal	113
XI	Incomprehensible Woman	115
XII	Three Scalloped Wings	121
XIII	Danger	134
XIV	Bigot's Astonishing Statement	145
XV	Therese Intervenes	161
XVI	Masks	173
XVII	A Trap for Bigot	185
XVIII	"La Tortue" Operates	196
XIX	Marguerite Changes Her Mind	207
XX	Letter Written by Pierre Launay to Marguerite Mayol, to be Held by Her Unopened until a Certain Date	212
XXI	The Déclanchement	216
XXII	Bigot Fingers His Scarf-Pin	220
XXIII	Bigot Bets a Thousand Francs	235
XXIV	Bigot's Story	245
XXV	Bigot Springs a Surprise	257
XXVI	Hesitations	267
XXVII	Max Renoux	271
XXVIII	After a Year	281

THE SEINE MYSTERY

THE SEINE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

SIX CANDLES

AMONG my journalistic experiences in Paris, this one stands out as remarkable, this story of a rich and famous man in the prime of life and in perfect health who knew that he was going to die and wanted to die. I do not see how any stranger revelation of a tortured human soul could be imagined. Alas! If only I were a Hawthorne or a Balzac — with this material at my disposal!

At any rate I have a tale to tell.

I well remember how impressed I was on that evening of Pierre Launay's birthday party (it was in January, 1924), when I was shown into his spacious *cabinet de travail* in the Rue de Bellechasse. Here, I reflected, was a literary workshop worth talking about. Here were dignity, luxury, everything to delight the eye. I thrilled over these evidences of success, the paintings, tapestries, bronzes, books in rare bindings and the great carved fireplace where logs were blazing. Perhaps I could write a masterpiece myself if I had a place like this to inspire me, instead

of my shabby little apartment in the Rue Jacob, and a café table for grinding out newspaper copy. Still, on second thought, I might not be so pleased if I had to give up my beloved Café de la Regence with its free-and-easy traditions for these stately surroundings.

There were four guests beside myself, Frenchmen in various walks of life: a senator, a priest, a doctor and a rich man's son. I could not restrain a feeling of elation at finding myself included in so distinguished a company, I, Alan Esterbrooke, a hustling American reporter. The thing had come about through a fortunate accident following an interview that I had been lucky enough to get with Pierre Launay about a year before, at the time of his sensational duel with Victor Mayol. It seems I showed some enterprise here (I succeeded in photographing the duel, which took place at sunrise on the Belgian frontier, thanks to a detective camera hidden under my coat, and the pictures were afterwards reproduced in the Paris *Illustration*) and I presented Launay's side of the quarrel so sympathetically that he took me up as a kind of protégé. I suppose my slap-dash ways amused him. He regarded me as a young barbarian, a type to study. And later he felt responsible for having put me up at a fashionable gambling club in the Place de l'Opera where he, who could afford it, used

to lose (or win) large sums at baccarat, whereas I could not afford my small losses; and the novelist was sorry when he learned that I had been suspended from the paper on one occasion through these indiscretions.

It was at this period that he began to invite me to dine with him, and so it came that I made the acquaintance of his beautiful young wife, who also became interested in my adventures; during many evenings that I spent at their delightful apartment near the Parc Monceau, they used to keep me talking about myself and my various escapades much more than was good for my humility. I began to take comfort in the thought that, if my life was not strikingly successful, it was at least entertaining.

Although I had often visited the novelist's apartment, I had never been invited to this studio which he maintained in the old St. Germain quarter, especially for his literary activities. Unlike most French writers Launay held that a man of letters should do his work away from home, after the habit of business men, and he went to his studio regularly every morning. It was here, with the help of two secretaries, that he produced the series of enormously popular, but by no means highly esteemed, novels and plays that had spread his fame, or notoriety, over the world and had brought him a large fortune, as fortunes are

counted by literary men in Paris. I happened to know that Pierre Launay had an income of three or four hundred thousand francs a year.

The birthday dinner passed off gaily enough, at least the first part, with an interchange of amusing memories among these friends of many years' standing, especially of early struggles. We all agreed that Launay's success overshadowed everything that the rest of us had done or could ever hope to do. Also that, in spite of envious and carping tongues, his work must ultimately be crowned by the highest honor that can be awarded to a writing man in France, that is, admission to the Academie Française. Pierre Launay was destined to be one of the Immortals.

At which suggestion our friend shook his head gravely and assured us that this would never come to pass.

"If you would only write a dull book, you'd be sure to get in," laughed the rich man's son.

"Or a ponderous historical play that would impress the high-brow critics, and then make a dignified failure," chuckled the senator.

The priest, speaking seriously, referred to that delicious and tenderly appealing story, *Le Cœur d'un Enfant,* Pierre Launay's masterpiece, written years before, and declared that an artist who produced that

exquisite work, was sufficiently honored by the response that he had called forth in all sensitive hearts, and need not be disturbed by the withholding of any other recognition.

"We are all proud of you, Pierre," he said feelingly. Then lifting his glass: "We drink to the author of *Le Cœur d'un Enfant*."

In an instant we were on our feet with eyes bright and glasses lifted.

"To the author of *Le Cœur d'un Enfant*," we echoed.

"Once more!" exclaimed the rich man's son, beckoning to the butler for more champagne.

In the enthusiasm of the moment, it may have escaped the others that Launay, seated at the head of the table, received this tribute with ever so slight annoyance or agitation, not to say distress; at least it seemed so to me, and he motioned impatiently to the rich man's son when the latter pounding on the table, repeated his favorite formula: "Once more!"

Once more was well put, for champagne and Burgundy had been flowing freely and we were all in high spirits, when suddenly, after coffee and liqueurs had been served, François, the faithful attendant, appeared bearing a broad silver tray upon which (in place of the traditional birthday cake) were burning six candles in six silver candlesticks, these being

placed in a circle around five large envelopes bordered with black that formed a little pile in the middle of the plateau. One of these envelopes was now ceremoniously deposited before each of the guests, and before each envelope a candle, the sixth candle being placed before Pierre Launay himself.

All of this, together with a sudden extinguishing of the other lights in the room, gave a touch of mystery to the proceedings, that seemed to me strangely unsuitable to a festive occasion. I glanced at M. Launay with a sense of growing apprehension; the others also showed themselves ill at ease, although they tried to take this development lightly.

"What a sense of *mise en scène!*" exclaimed the senator. "You must always do things in a dramatic way, *mon cher*. What's the idea of the black borders? Are you giving us copies of your last will and testament?"

"Are we to open these now?" some one asked.

We turned to our host, awaiting his answer, which was not immediately forthcoming. He sat looking down into the gold and dark blue of his demi-tasse, idly tapping a little gold spoon against the saucer. A fascinatingly impressive personality. I always liked the way Pierre Launay wore his clothes; his shirts and cravats, his modish eyeglasses. That tired, strong face. A man could not be fifty years old with the

record of books and plays behind him that Pierre Launay had turned out (not to mention various dissipations that were more than hinted at) without having paid a heavy price in weariness both of body and soul.

" No, not now," he answered, " not until you are alone. And even then, I ask each one of you for the sake of our friendship to unfold these sheets with particular seriousness; I might say, if you will permit it, in a spirit of consecration to something fine . . . beautiful."

He lifted his grave eyes and gazed about the table, fixing each of us slowly, deliberately, and I caught the same look in his face (as of one hunted and sick at heart) that I had seen that morning when he fought his duel.

" By the way," he added, " be careful of these envelopes; there's a sum of money in each one — ten thousand francs."

" Ten thousand francs!" exclaimed the senator.

" It's for an indicated purpose, to help in an effort I am asking you to make. You will understand."

Inasmuch as the talk that followed is of great importance to an understanding of this strange tale, I report it verbatim, for I have learned the trick that many newspaper men possess, of taking down a conversation almost literally — not in shorthand, but in

the brain — that is, of holding the words an hour or two until they can be put on paper, which I did.

" My friends, my very best friends," Launay began in a natural tone, " I have asked you here to-night on the occasion of my fiftieth birthday, which is also a crisis in my life, because I love you all and — I think I can count on your discretion and — and affection —— "

As our friend's seriousness grew, I had a sudden intuition that we were facing one of those poignant moments when a man is impelled to tear aside the veil of reticence that covers some intimate secret. The priest must have sensed this also, for he said reassuringly:

" You can, Pierre; you know you can."

Our friend composed himself and proceeded:

" You will understand my emotion when I tell you that this is my swan song. I'm going away — on a journey. That explains why Madame Launay is not here to-night to welcome you as she has done in previous years. My wife doesn't know yet what I'm going to tell you." He glanced at his watch. " A quarter past nine. I must ask permission to leave you at ten, and I have much to say before then."

" Is Madame Launay going with you on this journey? " the senator asked.

Pierre hesitated, then he said quietly, but with a touch of grim finality that made me shiver:

"No one goes with me. It's a journey I must make alone."

"Going after material for another book, I suppose?" the doctor suggested.

Launay shook his head slowly.

"No. I've written all the novels I shall ever write. All the plays——"

His eyes went off in a dreamy way and the rich man's son, who had taken too much wine and was bent on hilarity, made an effort against the deepening shadows:

"Dear old chap, why all the lu-lugubriousness? Great word that, eh?"

"Be quiet," reproved the priest. "Go on, Pierre."

"I want to say a word about my books and plays. You know how I've been attacked for them; but I've always had my defense. I have insisted that an artist is not called upon to be a moralist, so long as he paints life truthfully. Well, I've changed my mind lately. I have never admitted this before, but — the fact is, I knew exactly what I was doing when I wrote *La Louve*. I knew it would fire the imagination. I knew the seductive power of the scenes I depicted. I was sure of my technique. I had the exact formula for an immense circulation, and I used it deliberately."

Never can I forget Pierre Launay's look as he passed this judgment upon himself, a judgment that was shared, I fear, by most of his contemporaries.

" Great heavens, man," put in the doctor, " think of the pleasure you've given to millions of people in this damned dreary world! "

And the senator said, " I take it writing is a trade, like other lines of effort; somebody must satisfy a large and more or less legitimate public demand."

But Pierre Launay disagreed with this.

" It's no use, my friends. Even granting that I had a technical justification, it was my duty to have tried to do something better. There were beautiful things that I dreamed of writing; but I never wrote them. I put them off. I used to say that I would do my fine work later — after I was forty-five, then after I was fifty. Well, I'm fifty now and — I know I'll never do those beautiful things."

" Why not? " objected the priest. " A man can change. Tolstoi changed. And how many others? I admit I was disappointed, old friend, when you wrote *La Louve*. I'm afraid it did harm."

" Don't agree with you," contradicted the rich man's son. " *La Louve* is all to the good. Every word true. Know a girl like that myself. Little blonde. No disrespect, Father, but life is life. *Voilà!* Once more! All drink to *La Louve!* Fill 'em up, François."

" Wait! " interposed our host. " You mustn't drink to that book. I'd give my right hand never to have written it. I fought a duel to defend my position re-

garding *La Louve,* but ——" His face was pale. His fingers worked nervously.

"Pierre!" cried the priest.

After a moment Launay recovered himself and proceeded to tell us the story of Marguerite Mayol, daughter of the man with whom he had fought. It appears that this young lady was of a highly impressionable nature and she read *La Louve* at a time when she was distressed over a marriage that had been arranged by her parents, as is customary in France. She had not seen enough of her fiancé to have come really to love him, and when she learned accidentally that he was continuing relations with a girl in one of the Paris revues while professing ardent devotion to her (exactly as happened in the novel), Marguerite, embittered, not only broke off her engagement, but informed her parents that she was now going to lead her own life and decide her own future regardless of social conventions. She refused to be bound any longer by a code that was based on sham and deceit.

To make matters worse, Marguerite's mother, a frivolous woman, happened to mention to her husband that the girl had been reading *La Louve,* whereupon Mayol made savage remarks about this book and its destructive vogue, and ordered Marguerite to burn the contaminating pages. At which the young woman defended the novel with spirit, insisting that

it stood for the freedom of women, the breaking of the shackles of hypocrisy, and so on, and was finally driven into an out-and-out championship of Pierre Launay's heroine who had behaved, Marguerite declared, in a perfectly understandable way after her cruel experience. She had given herself freely to a man because she was disgusted with the whole marriage idea, as well she might be, the girl flung out, losing her temper, and thus stirring Mayol to white-faced anger.

His daughter held fast to her ideas, however, and insisted that the heroine of *La Louve* was more deserving of admiration than most of the fashionables whose example she was supposed to follow. At least, she had the courage of her convictions, and, said Marguerite, " I'd a hundred times rather give myself in love than sell myself in marriage."

The distressing part of it was that, after several such stormy scenes with her parents, Marguerite had carried out her foolish threats and left home for an unknown destination. A few weeks later word was brought to her father that the girl had been seen in the company of a stranger, and on several occasions had gone with him to his apartment.

It was after this that Victor Mayol, a veteran journalist of the old rigid school, broken-hearted, sought out the novelist and forced him to fight, in-

sulting him in an unbearable way, denouncing him publicly as a base creature who should be spat upon by decent citizens; a disgrace to his profession and to France. Nor had Mayol been willing to accept an offer of reconciliation, as is customary between brave opponents, after the fight had ended.

"I'd as soon be reconciled with a snake," Mayol said, drawing back contemptuously.

Such, very briefly, was the story our friend told us.

"You may ask why I fought with Mayol if I felt myself to blame for his daughter's making a mess of things," said Launay. "The answer is I didn't. My position has been that if a novelist is to be held accountable for every foolish thing any one of his million or so readers may do after reading one of his books, then we had better give up novel-writing and take to shoemaking or bricklaying."

"*Parbleu!*" approved the senator.

"But a month ago I received a letter from Marguerite Mayol — at a hospital in Neuilly — she was ill there ——" He tapped his coffee cup nervously. "Well, I went to see her and — she told me some things that made me wish I had never written *La Louve*."

There was a tense silence.

"Mind you, the girl doesn't blame me for anything. Not a reproach. She sticks to it that *La Louve*

is a great book. Calls me a torch-bearer in the march of women's progress. Says she regrets nothing she has done. Wouldn't change anything. Only she — well, she looked up at me with a pathetic little laugh and asked if I thought that in real life things always come out quite as fortunately as they did for my rotten heroine — marrying a rich man in the last chapter and all that."

"Ha!" exclaimed the rich man's son. "The young lady pleases me."

"Poor child!" sighed the priest.

"Do you mean to tell us that a girl of good family has allowed herself to do the — the things your charming heroine is supposed to have done?" questioned the senator.

"I don't know. Mademoiselle Mayol is an extraordinary character, a mixture of seriousness and — what shall I say? — love of adventure. She is afraid of nothing, curious about everything, but — no, I don't think so."

"What's the trouble with her?" asked the doctor. "Do you know what her illness is, Pierre?"

"Pleurisy — she narrowly escaped pneumonia. I am glad to say she is better now. She has left the hospital and gone back to her apartment — Rue de Ponthieu, number 11 bis. I've given her your names as friends of mine who will be friends of hers. Oh! She goes by the name of Louise Langer."

"What?" I nearly jumped out of my skin at this.

"She did that to spare her family," Launay explained, not noticing my confusion, nor did the others observe this, being busy jotting down the address.

"11 bis Rue de Ponthieu," muttered the doctor. "I'll try to call on her to-morrow."

The rich man's son took all this in a facetious spirit. "Beauty in distress! Tell us — what does she look like, this girl?"

"I'd call her quite attractive — a fine, eager face. Eyes that hold you."

"Grey eyes with — with long black lashes?" I interposed, trying to hide my agitation.

Launay looked at me keenly. "Why — yes."

"Pierre!" questioned the senator. "You haven't told us how she happened to send for you."

"Oh! That's right. I haven't. Well, she sent for me because she had a letter to deliver, a horrible letter ——" Again he began to show agitation, but controlled it. "She thought that I was in danger through circumstances connected with this letter, but she was mistaken. It's all very peculiar, for, as it happens, I *am* in danger, but not in the way she thought."

"You are in danger?" the doctor repeated. "What kind of danger?"

"Why — er — serious danger."

"Hold on!" interrupted the senator. "Let us take one thing at a time. How did Mademoiselle Mayol

happen to give you this letter? Why didn't it come to you through the post, like any other letter? "

"The person who wrote it did not know my address. She sent it to Mademoiselle Mayol — her friend — to give to me."

"It was from a woman? "

"Yes; it's a distressing case. This woman was an American girl, Marie Edwards, a young woman from a fine home in Louisville, beautiful, rich, but weak and unsophisticated, filled with silly enthusiasms, adventurous longings, in some ways like Marguerite herself. This girl was engaged to an American in the diplomatic service, stationed in Paris. That's why she came over — to be near him, Mademoiselle Mayol told me. Well, about six months ago this diplomat was recalled to Washington, and Marie was left here alone with a silly old aunt as chaperon who let her do exactly as she pleased. And what she pleased to do was to follow along in the smart, sporty set that shop on the Rue de la Paix and dance at Claridge's every afternoon and dine at the Café de Paris and —— "

"And get drunk in Montmartre every night," laughed the rich man's son.

"Exactly, and a few other things — I needn't go into details. . . . Several months passed and this American diplomat returned to Paris and when he found out what had been going on — well, two weeks

later it was announced that his engagement to Marie Edwards had been broken off and — the next day this poor girl killed herself."

Pierre Launay paused and a look of brooding sadness settled over his handsome features. I remembered this case well from having worked vainly on it in an effort to find a motive for the suicide.

"It happened about a month ago, didn't it?" I said.

Launay nodded. "Yes, that was the time when Mademoiselle Mayol sent for me."

"But — I don't see how this concerned you," frowned the doctor. "You didn't know this American girl, did you?"

"Not at all. I'd never heard of her. But she wrote me this letter — before she killed herself. She said my novel had demoralized her — influenced her to do things she never would have done. She held me responsible. She was bitter."

"But that's absurd," flamed the senator. "Outrageous! The girl was out of her mind. No book can make a woman do what she doesn't want to do — you know that."

"Of course, of course," the novelist agreed absently. "But she said it. She made this charge — just before she shot herself. You'll understand — it rather unnerved me."

He sat twining and untwining his long, well-kept fingers.

"And this danger that you spoke of?" questioned the doctor. "You say Mademoiselle Mayol thought it had something to do with Marie Edwards?"

"That's what she thought, but she was mistaken. It seems Marie Edwards left a message for Marguerite — said she had sent word to her brother and the man she had been engaged to, telling them about — this thing."

"You mean making this charge — that you were responsible for her death?"

Launay nodded again. "Yes. And as Marguerite had heard that Kentucky gentlemen are rather punctilious in the matter of a sister's honor, you see ——" He waved an explanatory gesture. "But I assure you that is not to be taken seriously."

I wondered how he could speak so positively, since I happened to know something about the ideas of Kentucky gentlemen on this subject; but I held my peace.

"I don't quite follow you, Pierre," interposed the doctor. "You told us just now that you are in serious danger?"

"Yes, but that's a coincidence. This real danger lies in developments that have come since I saw Mademoiselle Mayol — she knows nothing about

them. They go back to things that happened many years ago, things that are known to only two persons in the world, and — Mademoiselle Mayol is not one of them."

Launay paused and passed his hand over his eyes and forehead with a gesture of great weariness.

"I'm sorry I won't be able to finish what I have to say — not to-night. It's a pity. I was rather nerved up to it. You see the hardest part of what I have to tell you is still to come, but — I'm tired. I hope you fellows will dine with me here a week from to-night. Then I hope to make everything clear."

Now the priest spoke with great tenderness: "Pierre, why do you say you *hope* in such a strange way?"

"Because I — I may not be here. I hope to be here."

"May not be here?" we all exclaimed.

"You mean the voyage?" said one.

"I mean I may not be alive," he answered quietly. "Wait! I want you to know that — there's nothing the matter with my health. I'm all right, physically, perfectly sound. My doctor says so. I'm not going to die of any disease. And I'm not going to kill myself. I'm going to be killed."

It is impossible to describe the effect upon us of these quiet words, delivered there in the flickering

candle light, with those ominous black bordered envelopes before us. For some moments we sat in stunned silence, then broke into demands for details in proof of this extraordinary statement. Or was it a hoax that the novelist's fancy had imagined? If so, we objected. The joke was ill-conceived. Pierre Launay's life was too precious a thing to be made the subject of so grim a pleasantry. He insisted, however, that his words were to be taken literally.

" See here, my friend, do you mean to tell us seriously that you *know* some man intends to kill you? " the senator demanded.

" Perhaps it's a woman? " suggested the rich man's son.

" No, it's a man," our friend told us.

" Pierre, it isn't the brother of that young lady? " asked the priest.

" No. It's another case, quite a different case. I really can't tell you any more now. I must go to my wife. She's waiting. I have to break this news to her. It will be a shock." He rose from his chair.

" But you mustn't do that — don't you see? A man can't tell his wife a thing like that." The doctor laid a restraining hand on Launay's arm, but the novelist answered with a look of irrevocable decision.

" It is necessary."

" My dear fellow," the senator pleaded, " you say

we are your friends, your best friends. Very well, show your confidence in us. Put this whole affair into our hands. We will do what is necessary to protect you."

But Pierre was obdurate. He said he did not wish to be protected.

"What!" cried the doctor.

Launay shook his head.

"No! I am not going to resist any more. I've struggled enough — fought enough. This is the end. It's fate. I am glad — glad, do you hear? — that this man has decided to — to do this thing."

There was a desperate sadness in his eyes that daunted us and stilled our voices. We stared at him in dismay.

"Forgive me for the pain I am causing you, dear friends; I can't say any more now. If you'll excuse me, I'll go to my wife. Thank you all for your kindness. Until next week. Good night!"

With this Pierre Launay shook hands with each one of us and took his departure, leaving us in a daze of anxiety and incomprehension.

CHAPTER II

MARGUERITE

As this is the story of the Launay mystery and not a record of my own blunders and regrets, I would not think of mentioning a personal experience (a very precious one, although bitterly sad) were it not that this has a direct bearing upon the matter in hand.

For hours on that night of Pierre Launay's anniversary I lay awake thinking — thinking of my poor sweetheart whom I had lost for more than a year, and had now miraculously found through Launay's revelation. What a coincidence! Marguerite Mayol was the girl I had known and loved as Louise Langer. *I was the stranger!*

As my thoughts ran back, I recalled that December afternoon over a year ago when I first caught sight of this girl coming down the Rue Royale from the Madeleine. It was snowing, which is unusual in Paris, and I suppose the brisk air had brought a flush to her cheeks, an animation to her glances that doubly impressed me. She was accompanied by a middle-aged woman with a kind face, who might have been a governess, and who listened admiringly to the girl's gay talk.

Never had I seen a French girl who so delighted

me, and as I was merely strolling, I faced about and followed these two without any particular intention except a strong impulse that bade me do so. I knew quite well that this young lady was an eminently respectable person, but there could be no harm in looking at her.

The ladies stopped at a cake shop near the Rue des Petits Champs, whereupon I did the same and was rewarded by the faintest suggestion of an amused smile from the girl as they were leaving the shop. That settled it.

As we traversed the Place de la Concorde it seemed as if all the myriad lights blinked at me through the snowflakes in coruscating colors, encouragingly. And at the Rouen monument, just as they started up the Champs Elysées, my unknown enchantress turned mischievously and recognized my presence with a look that showed no displeasure; after which, wild horses could not have held me back.

Up the Champs Elysées I went, pulses tingling in delicious anticipation. Would she speak to me? Would she look back? What would she do? Alas! She did nothing, but presently turned off this aristocratic way into the Rue Montaigne, then into a less pretentious street, and entering a grey stone apartment house, vanished from my sight with no further sign of interest. Not even a glance!

And yet somehow I had faith that this adorable young woman would presently come out again. She must come out again. She was simply testing my devotion. So I waited, in the snowstorm, pacing back and forth, occupied with agreeable thoughts, running over in my mind the list of her perfections. Eyes that looked black, but were really grey when you came closer. And such a mouth! Generous, humorous, with the sweetest little unsymmetrical smile. No magazine-cover-beauty this girl, but a real woman with a will and a personality of her own. I could see that. Furthermore, she had a nice taste in dress. I loved the softness of her furs, the smartness of her black velvet *toque,* splashed with red, that sat on the heavy coil of her black hair. She might be twenty-one or twenty-two. A fairly tall and slender young person.

Well, she did come out again, exactly as I anticipated. She had thought thus to test the keenness of my interest; she admitted as much later, not now when she was dignified and a little frightened at this departure from conventionality. She had recognized me as an American, and she let me understand that she admired our simple direct ways, especially after a distressing experience of French insincerity. Yes, she would take tea with me, would be glad to, and we arranged a rendezvous for the very next afternoon at

a quiet place in the Rue Cambon. I gave her my card, and she told me she was Louise Langer.

Ah, that rendezvous! Was there ever anything so delightful! I had never met such a girl, so fascinating and sympathetic, a thoroughbred and a good fellow at the same time. She spoke English fluently, having spent several years in London.

And see how cunningly the threads of fate are woven. It was through Marguerite that I knew about Pierre Launay. She admired his books, his philosophy, and we spent hours discussing these. On some points we disagreed. I was in favor of women's emancipation as an abstract proposition, but when some particular woman I was fond of wanted to be emancipated, that was different. There were no bounds, however, to Marguerite's adventurous dreams. She was not afraid. Oh, my sweet love, see where your courage has brought you!

I fell asleep thinking of the month that followed, during which we met almost every day, this being the period when Marguerite was seen with a stranger. I was the stranger. But we were innocent of any wrongdoing, that I declare, although it must be admitted we were ardent lovers. Ardent lovers! "Oh, *ma chere petite femme adoree!*" I murmured to myself as I drifted off into dreamland.

The next afternoon as I approached the indicated

number in the Rue de Ponthieu I was conscious, along with anticipatory thrills, of something like panic. Suppose Marguerite had changed in her feeling toward me? Suppose she didn't care any more? What if she could not forgive me?

But I brushed these fears aside and boldly pressed the sonnette on the entresol floor. In spite of the devil and all his works we loved each other. I was sure of this.

The door was opened by none other than Therese, my sweetheart's devoted companion these many years, and I knew by the way she caught her breath at the sight of me and the way her eyes filled with tears that my faith was justified.

A moment later my sweetheart came in, attired in a delightful house garment, her dark hair done the way I always liked it. And my first glance showed me that she was scarcely changed in her loveliness. Perhaps a little thinner, with a heightened color; but her eyes were as candid, her manner as straightforward, as when I first saw her that afternoon in the Rue Royale. She had the same delicious irregularly tipped-up smile that I always doted on, the same amusing way of interrupting me with an " Oh, you absurd man! " when I said something she didn't approve of. Back of her smiles, however, I sensed a lurking sadness, and I saw that somehow out of her

sufferings she had gained a new spiritual quality that suffering often gives us.

I brought her an armful of long-stemmed pink roses, and as I stood there without a word, offering these and the tribute of my heart, my faith — everything, she must have read the unspoken message of my soul, for the color flooded to her cheeks in happy waves and, flinging her arms around my neck, she kissed me affectionately.

"Alan!" she murmured with her lips against my cheek.

"Marguerite!"

I made no reference to the past; that was a thing I had settled once for all in my own mind and with my own conscience; I never would pry into Marguerite's private affairs, nor show myself reproachful for anything that she had done or failed to do. Whatever her faults, I knew that of the two I was to blame. I should never have let this sweet child leave me.

"Do you remember, *chéri?*" she whispered, and I knew she was thinking of that fateful January morning, almost exactly a year ago, when she had burst into my little sitting room at ten o'clock and found me finishing breakfast. How her eyes shone that day! How she laughed and teased me! And I recalled how, as I beheld her youthful slenderness, I had longed to take her in my arms, and rising impetuously, had

drawn her to me without further preliminaries and covered her face with kisses, drinking in her fragrant young loveliness.

"Indeed I do remember. I remember exactly what I said to you, and I say it again: 'I love you, dear; I don't want you ever to leave me?'"

"And what did I say to that?" Her eyes were shining tenderly.

"You said you had no intention of leaving me. Say it now, dear."

But Marguerite shook her head.

"Not yet sir. You must prove your faith by — by good works."

There was a little quiver in her voice and we both were silent, thinking of that wonderful half hour a year ago, when we had decided that there must be no further postponement of our happiness. We would straightway go forth, as soon as I could put on a decent black coat, and seek out some minister of God, justice of the peace or other individual who was authorized to join together foolish young people in holy wedlock.

Alas! At that very moment came our quarrel, our absurd and unnecessary quarrel. It began with a trifling argument about domestic authority; just how much a young husband should interfere with his wife's actions, the point being that Marguerite had

received an invitation to one of the Comtesse de Marigny's gay parties. And I had characterized this lady as an adventuress, a social pirate (which she certainly was); whereupon Marguerite had flashed out:

"You ridiculous man! Suppose after we are married I should be invited to one of her evenings — what then?"

"I wouldn't want you to go to a place where there are queer people — you know what I mean."

"But who decides about the queerness? You like unconventional people yourself, Alan. Come, be sensible, *mon chéri!*"

"It's different with a man," I had insisted. "Besides, I see such people in connection with my work; whereas a woman ——"

"Oh, la, la! I know those tiresome old arguments. A woman's place is in the home. I wonder what sort of an absurd land America is. Why don't you tell me I mustn't take a glass of wine at meals, Alan?"

And so our quarrel had grown, one word leading to another, until at last she saw there was no changing me. I was hard, like my puritanical creed. If that was the kind of loving husband I proposed to be, then she would sooner have no husband at all. And just at the end she flamed into wrath, calling me a dispenser of chivalrous phrases that amounted to noth-

ing. I loved her, but I didn't trust her. I wanted to make a domestic prisoner of her, one who would meekly accept my standards in life, and — and then she burst into a flood of tears, her face buried in her arms.

"You don't love me, you don't understand me, you're not willing to make the least little concession for me. Oh, I'm so terribly unhappy!"

My poor darling! I didn't realize how desperately miserable she had been owing to happenings at her home that I knew nothing about. Nor that she had burned her bridges behind her and now had only me to turn to. I did love her, but my stubborn pride was stirred.

Oh, if I had only understood Marguerite better! Or myself better! If I had only drawn her to me comfortingly and whispered that her love and faith had conquered my fears. Why didn't I realize that I was talking to a high-spirited modern girl, who thought herself excessively advanced, but who was really just as fine and loyal as the most old-fashioned girl could possibly have been? If I had only left these foolish problems to settle themselves later on when they arose.

But no. With my infernal idea of masculine authority I remained unyielding, in spite of tears and pleadings.

My last memory was of Marguerite standing at the door arranging her furs, her little black velvet *toque* with the splash of red in it. Slowly she drew on her gloves.

"Listen!" she said quietly, but very white. "I want you to say you are sorry. Say you promise to trust me in the future and not interfere with my reasonable liberty ——"

She paused, waiting for some relenting word, but none came.

"If you won't say it, or can't say it — then — then I'm going to open this door and go out, and if you let me go now, Alan, I'll never come back, I'll never see you again, and — and whatever happens to me will be your fault. Now then."

No matter how long I live, I shall always be able to call up her image, there at the door, holding me in the wild supplication of her eyes. One minute. Two minutes. Not a word from either of us. Then slowly the door opened and she went out. I heard her descending footsteps on the stairs. Fool! I let her go. I had never seen her since.

And now after all these months, my sweetheart was restored to me. Once more I was holding her in my arms.

"Darling." I pressed her closer. "You will never know how I have suffered. It was all my fault, my

stupid, obstinate fault, but — I have suffered. I have said prayers for you. I've lain awake at night calling to you, begging for you. And now I've got you. Listen! I swear I'll never interfere with your liberty, never, nor question anything that you do or fail to do. I love you, dear. That's enough for me. I take you on your own terms. There. Is that good enough? "

Margie drew a long contented sigh, then with a little lift of the chin that tried hard to be brave, but was infinitely pathetic, she said:

" I suppose I may as well tell you about this last year. Come over here, ridiculous one." She led me to a purple and gold divan and proceeded to arrange the pillows. " Let me make you comfortable. There! "

I looked around at the pleasant furnishings and tried to assume a matter-of-fact air.

" You seem to have a nice place here."

" Yes! I'm glad you like it. You see I've done quite well in my work. I have engagements for months ahead."

" Singing?"

" Yes, old ballads, peasant songs — the very ones I used to sing for you in the Rue Jacob. Louise Langer may be quite well known, *mon chéri*, one of these days," she laughed. " I've been compared to Yvette Guilbert."

" Good! Where do you sing? It's a wonder I haven't heard you accidentally."

Her face clouded.

" I'm afraid you won't like it exactly, but I've done the best I could. I sing in vaudeville, in cabarets —— "

" That's the way we all do," I agreed, " it's the way artists have to do — we take the assignments life gives us."

" You dear old philosopher," she smiled gratefully.

I told her how sorry I was to know she had been ill. " Sorry and yet glad, for if you hadn't been ill I shouldn't have found you; should I? I must say you're looking mighty well — never prettier."

She blushed at my praises.

" You fraud! "

" Say, Margie, couldn't you sing me one of those old songs — just hum it, the way you used to? Go on! Sing *' Monsieur le curé s'en va.'* Remember how I used to laugh over that? Please."

At which, without leaving my side, my darling, her eyes twinkling a little, yet still vaguely shadowed, hummed a stanza of that amusing and mildly improper ditty:

Monsieur le curé s'en va
Pour cueiller la noisette;
Il emmene avec lui,
C'est pour se divertir,
La plus jolie fillette
Qu'il a pu choisir.

"Great!" I applauded. "Now the next one!" But Marguerite shook her head.

"Not now, *chéri*. We must be serious. You haven't told me about your work."

"Oh, I'm plugging along at the same old game. May have to go over to London this week."

"Yes? What for?"

"This Ruhr thing. It's getting to be a bore. I've been on that same job for weeks."

"You must be making good," she said brightly, but I saw she was thinking of something else.

I looked at her sharply.

"See here, Margie, what's the matter? What have you got in the back of your head?"

She looked me straight in the eyes — there was no possibility of evasion or deceit in this girl.

"There is something I've got to tell you," she said finally, but I told her I didn't want to hear it, dissembling my fears.

"You *must* hear it, Alan! You remember the Comtesse de Marigny?"

"Well?"

"Well, I've been to some of her parties — I told you I would."

"That's all right."

"And I — I smoked opium — two or three times — at her house. I told you I was going to."

"Oh! I didn't believe you really would do that."

"I always keep my word. . . . It's a wonderful experience."

"Keeping your word?"

"The dreams! The visions! Soft lights! Entrancing low music! You wear lovely loose garments and lie down on special couches that the Comtesse has. It's exactly as Pierre Launay describes it in *La Louve*. You just float away. . . . Some of the best people in Paris smoke. It awakens depths in you that you didn't know were there."

"Depths?"

"I mean depths of the soul. You discover your own noblest aspirations. Your fancy is quickened — like magic. You have delicious sensations."

In spite of her confident tone I saw that Marguerite was troubled.

"I didn't do it often, *chéri*," she added apologetically, "only a few times when I was blue and needed something to — to develop my best possibilities."

"That's a new one on me, smoking opium to develop one's best possibilities. Maybe I need some."

I forced myself to speak lightly, but I was a sick-hearted young fellow, for I knew what this might mean. My poor foolish Marguerite!

"Alan!" she started, but checked herself.

Her eyes were fixed on me searchingly. She seemed to be reading my thoughts. Then suddenly she began to chatter gaily and naturally, as if this confession had taken a load off her heart. She was quite like her old self, and I noted this change with joy, for it showed that after all she had not done anything so very terrible.

"Alan!" she repeated presently, "I'm so grateful to you for not being shocked — about that."

"But I *was* shocked."

"Anyway, you didn't show it, or say anything bossy about what I must do or mustn't do. I appreciate that, sir." She made her little curtsey, "and to reward you, I — I'm not going to do it any more."

I was startled by the unexpectedness of this decision.

"You mustn't give up something you approve of, just to please me, Margie," I warned her.

"Why not? I *want* to please you, Alan, especially when you don't insist upon something — that's the way women are. Besides, I have another reason." Her face grew serious. "I had a terrible lesson not so very long ago, *chéri.* There was a friend of mine who did this thing — an American girl — and *ecoutez!* That is how I came to send for Pierre Launay while I was sick in the hospital."

She now began to tell me the tragic story of Marie

Edwards, but I informed her that I knew it already — from Launay himself.

"Was he much disturbed about it?" she asked.

"Not so much about that as about something else," I told her. "He said *you* warned him that he is in danger. Did you?"

"Why — yes, I did," she hesitated. "*Attendez!* That reminds me. We must have tea. Therese!" she called, and almost immediately the smiling old attendant wheeled in a tea table, temptingly arranged, and placed this at one of the long windows that gave upon the entresol balcony. And she proceeded to fill our cups from a steaming samovar.

"We might have the window open, don't you think, Therese? It's so mild."

It was indeed one of those lovely spring-like days that come occasionally in Paris toward the end of January. And presently we were seated out of doors, literally so, for Therese, having swung the long windows wide open, pushed the little table outside on to the stone balcony, and there we were looking right down into the narrow street only a few feet below us.

"Perfectly delightful!" I exclaimed. "But I don't quite see the connection between my asking you about Pierre Launay's danger and your sudden suggestion that we have tea."

"Oh, incredulous one! You needn't laugh. There

is a connection. Monsieur Launay had tea with me when he called at the hospital. It was a mild day like this and we were sitting at an open window like this when an extraordinary thing happened — it came as an omen, a portent of evil. Therese will tell you that some of the most important things in history have been foretold by tea-leaves."

"Tea-leaves!"

"Isn't it true, Therese?"

"Indeed it is, Mademoiselle."

"For instance, Napoleon was told by tea-leaves that he would lose the battle of Waterloo. Wasn't he, Therese?"

"*Certainement,* Mademoiselle."

"You can read all about it in a book at the Bibliotheque Nationale, if you don't believe me."

"I believe you, Margie. I'm very much interested, but — please let me get this straight. You were having tea at the hospital with M. Launay when this thing happened: is that right?"

"Yes, beside an open window, just like this, only the hospital window looked out upon a courtyard."

"Well?"

"Well, as M. Launay passed me his cup for some more tea I happened to glance into the bottom of it, and there I saw, as plainly as I see you, the porten-

tous sign of the circle and the cross — a cross inside a circle. Understand? "

"You mean the arrangement of the tea-leaves? "

" Yes. One almost never sees it. I was so startled that I looked away, and immediately my eyes fell upon a taxi-cab waiting in the courtyard. Whereupon, *chéri,* I had an intense feeling almost amounting to knowledge, that the impending danger — the danger that the sign indicated, understand —— ? "

" Yes, yes."

" That this danger was connected with that taxi-cab."

" A danger to Pierre Launay? "

" Naturally. It was his cup."

All of which Marguerite told me most seriously, while Therese approved with nods and confirmatory gestures.

" Did you notice the driver of this taxi-cab? " I questioned.

" No, I only saw it from the back."

" Was it Pierre Launay's taxi-cab? "

" Of course it was. That's the point. He drove away in it. I saw him."

" And is that all you had to go on in giving M. Launay your warning of danger? "

" Isn't that enough? "

" My poor Margie! " I smiled indulgently. Then, half to please her, I added, " By the way, you don't happen to recall the number of that taxi-cab, I suppose? Or the color of it, or what company it belongs to — anything like that? "

My sweetheart closed her dark eyes and puckered up her brow, trying hard to remember; then suddenly she leaned forward, pressing her hand to her heart.

" Wait! " She gave a little cry of alarm. " I have that same feeling again! That same strong sense of *knowledge!* "

She clutched my arm impulsively.

" Alan! Look! " she whispered, pointing down to the street. " That taxi-cab coming towards us! *That is the one!* "

CHAPTER III

THE DARK CORRIDOR

I WAITED impatiently for the following Friday evening, filled with a vague apprehension, hoping that my benefactor would have found some way of escape from the peril that threatened him. But my hope was not justified.

Pierre Launay greeted us in the most natural way and charmed us, as usual, with his brilliant talk while the meal progressed, no reference being made to the serious matters that were in our thoughts, until the servant had withdrawn.

" I've told François he can have the evening off," our host said at this point. " We shall be quite alone. *Voila!* Now we can discuss more important things."

Our talk began with references to those black-bordered envelopes that Launay had given us so dramatically at our previous meeting, and I need only say here that these were intimate appeals to each one of his five friends, that we would search into our own hearts and decide upon some one, *just one* unselfish or benevolent action that we would be glad to do, and glad to remember in future years for his sake. One beautiful thing that would cost each one

of us something in time and personal effort, and that might offset many acts of selfishness and worldliness. I have not quoted the exquisite words of his appeal, because it seemed to me there was something sacred about them. Besides, the story of these personal good works that we were thus called upon to perform, has only the slightest relation to the Launay mystery.

"I'm a tough old politician, my friend," the senator confessed, "but I tell you there were tears in my eyes when I read what you wrote to me. Of course I'll try my best to coöperate in your plan, I'll give some thought and time to it; but you understand this sort of thing — er ——" He paused in embarrassment and the priest relieved him.

"You can be sure we were all deeply touched, Pierre. Your words are an inspiration. No one can foretell what wonderful results may ensue, directly and indirectly."

"One beautiful thing. It's a pretty fancy," mused the medical man.

Even the rich man's son was stirred from his habitual flippancy: "Yes, and it's mighty generous of you to set aside that money. If you don't mind, I'm going to add an equal amount from the disgustingly large allowance that my old gentleman makes me. Ha! This will be the first good use I've ever made of it. Rather amusing, eh?"

The priest turned to Launay with a benignant smile: "You see? It's the power of goodness."

But the writer, who was no longer concealing the deep melancholy that possessed his soul, merely said:

"No, it's just an effort to — to do something worth while — for a change — before it's too late. My idea is that you fellows dine here every week or two and discuss these things. I have this studio for a year yet, and it will be entirely at your disposition. I care a lot about this, in fact it — it's about the only thing I do care about."

The doctor was studying him attentively.

"See here, Launay, just what are you driving at? Before we discuss benevolences, haven't we an immediate matter to consider — that danger you spoke about?"

"Yes," urged the priest, "we are greatly disturbed about that, Pierre. You must give us the details."

"I know. Of course," our friend agreed absently, whereupon the senator joined in:

"You can't put the whole burden of these good works upon us. We count on your coöperation."

"But I — I won't be here."

"What! Come, be reasonable," appealed the doctor. "Let us have the whole story of this danger. You said there is a man who means to harm you?"

"Harm me? He means to kill me."

"But why?"

Launay passed his hand wearily over his eyes.

"Please let me tell it in my own way. It's hard for me. You see I thought this fellow was dead long ago — supposed he had drunk himself to death. He used to be a wild Bohemian; but some men are tough. Three weeks ago I met him in the Place de la Concorde. I recognized him in a minute, after all these years, in spite of a disguise."

"Did you speak to him?" asked the doctor.

"Not exactly, not in words, but I knew that he knew me. There's no doubt about it."

"Pierre, you say you spoke to him, but not in words?"

"I mean there were no significant words, no open recognition. We just looked at each other."

"You exchanged *some* words? Casual words?"

"That's it, casual words." He paused and then continued with an effort. "Listen. I may as well get this over with. The main point is — the truth is I — I have dishonored myself. I am not talking about my books — something else. It's because I did this other thing that I wrote such books. I wanted money for pleasures, vanities, excitements. I wanted to forget, but — I couldn't."

There was a painful silence.

"This thing I refer to," he continued, "happened twenty-two years ago, but time hasn't made it any easier to bear. On the contrary, it has been worse lately. There was a period when I hardly thought of it; I had almost forgotten, but suddenly it began again — the memory. I think of it in the night. I wake up in the morning and . . . remember. A chance remark, a newspaper paragraph, a line in a play, a thousand things recall it — I am the man who dishonored himself. Oh, I've been punished! Always back of my pleasures, successes, dissipations — has been this — thing. Those who say there is no remorse except when a wrong-doer is found out, are horribly mistaken."

"My poor friend," put in the priest, "it's never too late to make amends."

"It's too late here."

At which the senator broke in with a series of impatient questions:

"But what is this thing? Give us the facts. I gather it's a wrong you did to some one?"

"Yes."

"A wrong you did to this man who talks about killing you?"

"Yes. He will do it."

"Wait! Let me understand. When you first met this man in the Place de la Concorde three weeks ago,

you say he had disguised himself? Do you mean he had disguised himself with you in mind? "

"Yes."

"Then the meeting was not accidental? "

"Not on his part. He had sought me out — followed me."

"Did he know that you recognized him? Does he know it now? "

"I don't think so. No, I'm sure he doesn't."

"Have you seen this man since? "

"Yes, I've seen him every day."

"And talked to him? "

"In a way — yes."

"In a way? You either have or you haven't."

"Well, I have, but — nothing of importance. We never mention the things we are thinking of."

"Extraordinary! Did you — did you see him yesterday? "

"Yes, I saw him yesterday. I have seen him to-day. I shall see him ——" He turned slowly and looked toward the door of the studio, which stood ajar. He seemed to listen. Then he turned to me. "Alan, do you mind closing that door? François must have left it open."

I rose and closed the door and, as I did so, observed that the corridor was dimly lighted by a single electric lamp at the far end near another door that led into

the antechamber. As I returned to my place the talk continued. The doctor was saying:

"My dear fellow, you must see that this is simply a case of nerves — like those foolish terrors we all suffer from sometimes in the night. You've been working too hard — worrying. You need a rest, a change."

"Yes. I'm going to have a change."

"Come now, be sensible. You say you've seen this man every day? Where have you seen him?"

"At various places — in the street — different streets."

"By appointment?"

"No."

"But these meetings can't have been fortuitous? You must have arranged them in some way?"

"He arranged them. He knows my habits. It's part of his scheme, a most ingenious scheme he has worked out to ——" Launay half closed his eyes and seemed to draw back from the next word.

"To what?"

"To kill me."

"Nonsense. Why hasn't he done it long ago? Where has he been all these years?"

"I don't know."

"He's like people who talk about suicide and live forever. Dangerous criminals don't talk, they act."

"He *will* act —— If you had seen his eyes!"

Here the senator assumed the rôle of questioner:

"Have it your own way, my friend. We'll assume that you are going to be killed. Very well. What then? Will it be known who did this thing — afterward?"

Pierre answered thoughtfully, in an entirely detached way.

"Yes. I think so. If I am correct in my anticipation of this man's purposes, he will not be able to hide the authorship of the crime. Understand, he may not be apprehended, the man himself — I don't think he will be. I don't want him to be — I've explained that; but every-one will know how the crime was committed, and who committed it — at least I think so."

"You mean the Paris police will know the man's name and all about him, but will not be able to find him — arrest him? Is that it?"

"No, they won't know his name — not his real name, for he comes out of the shadows. Let me make myself clear. You might have evidence that a certain individual occupied a certain room in an hotel on a certain day, or committed some crime on a certain night, without having any definite knowledge about the man himself, without even knowing his name — see?"

"Do you know the details of this man's plan — the weapon he will use — the time?"

Pierre replied dreamily. " I don't know the time — exactly. The weapon? Yes. It's a rather amusing weapon. I don't think it has ever been used before."

This interested me keenly and I made bold to ask:

" Do you mean that this particular weapon has never been used before, or that this *kind* of a weapon has never been used? "

" This kind of a weapon. Of course I may be mistaken, but — I don't *think* it has ever been used before."

" Then it's not a pistol? "

" No."

" Not a sword, a dagger? "

" No."

" Not poison? "

" No."

There was a pause now and presently the senator resumed:

" Suppose we come back to this wrong that you spoke of — this thing that gives the man his justification — what was it? "

" I can't tell you that."

" Why not? Let's be practical. Whatever it was, you can compensate the man. You're rich."

Pierre shook his head. " You can't satisfy hate with money. Besides I — I don't want to live. I have no comfort in life."

At this the priest spoke, with a tone of authority. "You can have comfort, my poor friend. You can ask forgiveness and find peace of mind through God's mercy, just as greater sinners than you have found it, and always will."

"Thank you, Father, but there's no comfort for a man who doesn't believe, who cannot believe. I've tried to pray. Sometimes I've read spiritual books, but ——" He shook his head despairingly. "Shouldn't I be worse than a coward to profess religion insincerely? I should be lying to God."

"Ah! You couldn't lie to God unless you believe in God."

"Could you confess publicly?" suggested the senator.

"I've thought of that, but — I can't even confess to you fellows who love me. I can't force myself to do it. It's the shame. I can't confess to my wife who would die for me. No. Let this man carry out his plan. It's more merciful."

"I don't believe he will do it. He'll think of the consequences."

"There won't be any consequences. Remember, I charge you fellows not to take any steps in this matter, now or later. If you should disregard my wish, this man will simply tell the truth, and I am the one who will be punished. Remember that. As a matter of

fact, I ought to be punished, but — I feel as if I am paying a little with my life. I'd like not to have this blot upon my name — after I am gone. I want you to give me your promise, each one of you, that no matter what happens, you will not interfere. It's the last thing I ask of you."

What could we do but agree to this? His eyes were on us so pleadingly, so compellingly. After all, it was his secret. We were his closest friends. He had told us these things of his own accord, trusting to our honor that we would not reveal them. And now he placed the seal of secrecy upon us.

One by one we promised. Never would we betray his confidence, nor act upon this knowledge that he had given us. Not even to protect him. Not even to avenge him. Perhaps in our hearts some of us promised with reservations.

It was during this weird ceremonial that I noticed (with my sharp reporter's ears) a thing that escaped the attention of the others; in fact, for some moments, in spite of Pierre's impressive words, I had been aware of a vague inattention in myself as if I were conscious of *something else* that was happening near us. And now I distinctly heard a sound in the corridor outside the studio, the long, narrow hallway into which I had just looked when I closed the door. The sound I heard was that of a person who sneezes

in spite of an effort not to. And to my surprise, as I glanced toward the door, I saw that it was again ajar — only a crack, yet unmistakably ajar. How could this be when I had carefully closed it? I was positive I had closed that door.

I looked around the table and saw that the others were absorbed in what Pierre Launay was saying, quite unconscious of that stifled sneeze. And, acting on an impulse, I profited by their preoccupation and stole away unobserved, slipping out into the corridor. My newspaper instinct told me there was something of importance to be found out here.

I closed the door cautiously behind me and immediately regretted doing so. Suddenly I realized that the corridor now was dark, absolutely dark, although I knew it had been dimly lighted only a few minutes before. During this brief interval, some one had entered and put the light out. Who was this man? Why had he put the light out? Where was he now? Perhaps here in darkness — within a few feet of me. I felt sure he was here, and I found no comfort in the thought. Had he come as an eavesdropper, or to carry out some more sinister purpose? I shivered as my imagination tried to picture what this purpose might be.

Now it is physically impossible for two persons to remain even a minute in groping darkness within a

narrow space without one or the other betraying his presence. A man must breathe. His clothes will rustle. His shoes will creak. . . .

I listened, holding my breath. Of course, this intruder knew I was here. He had seen me enter the corridor and close the door behind me. So there was nothing to be gained by dissembling. I might as well seize the initiative. If I did not, he probably would. And it came to me that perhaps this prowler of the night was as uneasy in his mind as I was myself. So, taking heart from this fancy, I reached out along the wall and took a step forward. Still silence! I took another step and listened again. . . .

Ah! I caught it that time, a soft thud like the cautious placing of a rubber heel. There! A whine of leather, the crackling of a knee-joint, then a sharp hiss as when a man sucks in his breath determinedly, followed by quick, stealthy steps and the opening of a door. It was the door at the end of the corridor beyond which was the antechamber. He must have put out the light there also, for the whole place was dark.

As I darted on, guiding myself by the wall, my hand touched an electric button, a piece of luck, and instantly as the light flashed out, I saw that the door into the antechamber, which opened inward toward me, was in the act of closing. My adversary had passed outside and was pulling the door shut after

him. There was his hand, bent around the edge of the door, pulling it toward him. He had evidently caught the door in this way as he dashed through, and was dragging it after him with his left hand while he fumbled with his right for the knob on the other side. I seized the knob on my side and pulled against him with all my might.

Our strength must have been about equal, for the slightly opened door scarcely moved, merely swayed an inch or two either way, under our efforts. My opponent could not draw it shut, nor could I force it open, so there we were at a standstill, each straining on his own side and neither of us able to see the other. But I saw his hand plainly enough — four fingers curled in a savage clutch around the edge of the door-frame. Absently I studied these fingers while I tugged and puffed and saw that they were white and well cared for, with carefully manicured nails. A gentleman evidently, this stealthy visitor of the night!

Then I noticed something peculiar about the middle finger: most peculiar. There was a long scar on the inner side, the side that usually presses against the forefinger; but now, these two being spread, I could see this scar plainly and noted that it ran in a straight line along the digit's whole length from nail to base. Extraordinary that a scar should be so long

and so straight and so strangely placed! One would say that the cutting instrument, whatever it was, that made this scar, had been guided by a ruler. Furthermore, the scar showed a bluish coloring, as if it had been partly covered over by the needle of a tattooer.

I was so startled by this discovery that I was quite off my guard, when presently my enemy tricked me by abruptly releasing his hold on the door, the result being that I was thrown violently upon my back and half stunned as my head struck the floor. I heard the door leading out from the antechamber open and close, and a little later I caught the dull bang of the heavy outer portal as the concierge pulled her cordon. Some one had gone into the street.

As soon as I could gather my wits I rushed out and questioned the lodge-keeper, an alert guardian of the premises, but found her positive no suspicious person had passed her door. Only one of the regular tenants had left the house. It was evident, however, that a stranger, lurking in the shadows and watching for his opportunity, might have made his exit unperceived when she touched the cord. That must have been what happened, for we searched the courtyard diligently, also the central stairway, without finding trace of anyone.

I returned to the studio, not particularly proud of myself for having allowed this intruder to outwit me,

but realizing that I brought important news and eager to see what effect it would have upon Pierre Launay. Perhaps he would know immediately who this man with the peculiarly marked finger was, and would be inspired to give us some new revelation. Perhaps this eavesdropper, brigand of the night or whatever he was, would prove to be the unforgiving enemy, the resurrected drunkard, the prospective murderer.

But when I caught sight of Pierre Launay's face, gaunt, worn with the shame of his confession, the bitterness of his humiliation, I realized that this was not the moment to put any further strain upon him.

"Poor fellow," whispered the doctor. "He's at the end of his strength. He's going home."

I saw that my absence from the room had not been noticed, and made some plausible excuse about telephoning.

"Did M. Launay let you farther into his secret?" I inquired.

The doctor shook his head.

"No. He talked around in circles, the same thing over and over again. This wicked act that he committed years ago — but he won't tell us what it was. And this enemy who hates him and is going to kill him — we can't find out who the enemy is. It's an obsession — pathological. We see such cases in the hospitals."

"You don't think there's any real danger, doctor?" I asked uneasily.

"Not from without. The danger is here." He tapped his forehead. "Look. He's leaving. He's beckoning to you."

"I'm afraid there's more in M. Launay's fears than you imagine," I insisted, feeling guilty for withholding my important knowledge, yet hesitating to divulge it at this moment. Besides, it was probably better to tell M. Launay himself and let him decide what use he wished to make of my information.

"Oh well, we'd better give him a chance to rest over night," the man of science decided, and I let it go at that. "I'll call on Pierre to-morrow and try to get the whole story from him."

But there was not to be any to-morrow.

CHAPTER IV

"IN CASE I SHOULD BE DROWNED"

As he was leaving us Pierre Launay took me aside for a farewell message. He delivered it at the door, there in the black, foggy night, while his taxi-cab waited.

"Esterbrooke," he began abruptly. "I know about your friendship for Marguerite Mayol."

I was so staggered by the unexpectedness of this that I could only murmur a stumbling assent.

"You were the stranger I spoke of — it was your apartment she went to a year ago," he went on.

"Yes sir," I admitted. "We had an unfortunate quarrel. It was my fault. I've been very unhappy about it, but — I think it's all right now. You see for all these months I haven't known her address. I didn't even know her name. I thought it was Louise Langer."

"I understand. Please don't think I am prying into your affairs. I have a serious reason for speaking. Alan, you are interested in Mademoiselle Mayol?"

I assured him I cared for her more than for anyone in the world.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, my boy. She's a lovely girl, a most unusual girl. Her sad experiences have refined her nature, brought out its real nobility. She will make you a splendid wife."

He was fairly taking my breath away.

"But she hasn't consented yet, sir."

"She will consent. She loves you, I know."

Pierre Launay drew a long sigh and, turning from me, peered out into the chill night. Through the mist I could just make out the dim shape of his taxi-cab drawn up at the curb, its red light blinking at me.

"My reason for referring to this," he resumed, "is that Mademoiselle Mayol may get a letter, a rather peculiar letter containing important information."

He hesitated and seemed to study me.

"You say she *may* get such a letter?"

"Yes, it isn't certain. She may get it in a week — in six months — she may never get it."

"This letter will not be from you, I suppose?"

"On the contrary. The fact is," — he nervously fingered a button of his coat — "the fact is I have already written this letter, but I may not send it — that is, I have sent it — in a way — but it may not be delivered."

For many a day I puzzled over this floundering utterance and recalled the agitated manner of its

deliverance. *He had written a letter, but he had not sent it — that is, he had sent it — in a way — but it might not be delivered!* What was Pierre Launay trying to say to me, or to conceal from me?

"If there is anything I can do, sir, for you or for Mademoiselle Mayol — at any time, I shall be glad — proud to do it."

"Thank you." He gripped my hand. "It's just this, in case Mademoiselle Mayol receives this letter and shows it to you, as she probably will —— Poor child! she certainly needs your guidance — there may be an immediate decision to be made, and, in that event, I want you to give her your most deeply considered advice, bearing in mind what you know and — the interests of all concerned. Can I count on you to do that?"

He seemed to wait anxiously for my reply, and now for some reason my heart began to quicken its beat.

"Yes — yes, sir," I promised.

"I'm very grateful. I know how strange all this must seem to you, but be patient. The point is I have said things in this letter that I hope Mademoiselle Marguerite will never mention, except to you. And I hope you will both agree that the letter may be destroyed — never referred to again."

"I understand."

"However, if you think differently, if you both

should feel that this information ought to be made public, then — then you must follow your own judgment."

How pale he was! How grave his eyes! I shall always remember that look, wistful but resolute, as of one who goes unfalteringly to his fate.

"I suppose you — you wouldn't feel like trusting me with this information now?" I ventured.

"No, no! I couldn't do that, I couldn't possibly do that." He answered so emphatically that I regretted my imprudence.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"It's nothing. Well, I think that's all. Oh! One thing more! In case anything should happen to me suddenly, in case I should be drowned, for instance ——"

"Drowned?"

"Yes. You're a clever man, Esterbrooke. You have a good American combination of initiative and common sense. You would not allow yourself to be bound too closely by old French traditions. You would know when to act and when to hold your tongue."

I was stunned by his calm, business-like air in making this recommendation. Drowned!

"Good-bye, my boy," he concluded. "Learn a lesson from my mistakes; don't put off your best

writing to the future. That's what I regret most, that I didn't do the work I might have done. There were so many fine things, beautiful things that were in my power to do, but — I did not do them."

Ah, the bitterness of that cry. I promise myself here and now, while this sad memory is strong in me, that I will put my modest talents to better use than I have in the past.

" Good-bye," he said again. " It's cold, isn't it ? "

Pierre Launay shivered, turned up his coat collar, and a moment later was gone. Through the deep shadows I heard the hoarse horn of his taxi-cab calling its warning as they rolled toward the river.

CHAPTER V

BLANCHE LAUNAY

After my agitations and loss of rest, I had decided to sleep late the next morning, and had fastened a peremptory notice on my door that I was not to be disturbed for any reason whatsoever until ten o'clock, which would allow me time enough to be at the office at eleven for a conference with my chief. There was a growing tension between France and England over the Ruhr situation, that might require a series of special interviews.

Nevertheless, Marie Louise, who had never before violated the consigne, took the law into her own hands on this occasion and knocked boldly at half-past eight.

"*Entrez,*" I called sleepily, supposing that the indicated hour had arrived and cursing all newspapers, editorial assignments and other exigencies of life that interfered with the slumber of a healthy young reporter. "Put it on the table and get out," I grumbled, referring to my café au lait, and hot croissants, which I assumed she had on a tray as usual; but Marie Louise did not budge.

"I beg Monsieur's pardon, but there's a lady who says she must see Monsieur."

"A lady? I can't see any ladies. I told you. . . ."

"It's Madame Launay."

"Madame Launay!" I sat up and stared at the maid. "Did you say Madame Launay?"

"Oui, Monsieur. The poor lady is in such a state —I am sure Monsieur would never forgive himself not to——"

"Yes, yes, I see. Ask Madame Launay if she will be kind enough to wait a few minutes. Show her into the little *salon.*"

I hurried into my clothes, wondering what in the world could have happened, and reverting uneasily to events of the evening before. There must have been alarming developments to have brought this lady here — at such an hour! Why hadn't she telephoned? Could it be that——?

As soon as I saw Blanche Launay's face, I realized that she had brought bad news. She was faultlessly dressed, as usual, wrapped in expensive furs, an exquisite *femme du monde;* but her eyes were anxious, haggard, as if she had not closed them through the night, which was indeed the case.

Madame Launay at this time was a woman of forty-two, but she did not look a day over thirty, a brilliant *mondaine* with wonderful dark eyes under masses of tawny yellow hair and an alluring slenderness. She was the type that never lacks adorers;

and with it all unspoiled, a golden-hearted, generous woman. I may say at once that, but for her encouragement, I could never have endured the sorrows that were then preparing in my own life.

"Each one of us has had a heavy cross to bear, Alan Esterbrooke," she said to me months later, "and each one has made the burden easier for the other."

Madame Launay came toward me with hands extended.

"Alan," she faltered, "he hasn't come home, he hasn't sent any word."

I brought forward a chair and she sank into it, the picture of woe.

"I — I saw him last night," I said. "He spent the evening with us."

"I know. That's why I came. I thought you might have some idea where he is. I am so distressed." She caught my hand pleadingly.

"He's been overwrought, worried," I suggested awkwardly. "I rather imagine he wanted to be alone for a day or two — to think out these things that are bothering him. You know how writers are. You may get a letter this evening."

She shook her head.

"He wouldn't have left me in this anxiety. No. Something terrible has happened. He warned me.

He said it would happen. Alan, we must find him — we must notify the police."

"No, no! That wouldn't be his wish — he said so."

"He said so? He said what?"

And now Blanche Launay insisted that I should tell her exactly what her husband had revealed to us.

"Don't try to hide anything — I know it all," she assured me.

I looked at her hesitatingly.

"You know about ——"

"About a danger that threatens him? Yes, he told me, and about a man who — who ——" The poor lady began to sob.

"But, dear friend, that isn't true. Your husband is ill. This whole thing is in his imagination — pathological, the doctor told me so."

"You mean he's — out of his mind?"

"Not exactly, but he's been under a great strain — it's a sort of nervous collapse."

"He hasn't telephoned, telegraphed, anything," she wept.

It grieved me to see her like this.

"I understand how you feel, Madame, but we've got to keep our heads. I'm going to help you. I'm sure I can," I declared with the confidence of youth (I was twenty-five). "You know I have a little pull through my newspaper connection. Only I must

have more facts; there are certain things we couldn't get from your husband. He said he was going to tell you the truth, and, if he did, it might be a good idea to let me have a little of it, don't you think ? "

Blanche Launay smiled at me sadly. She knew how loyal I was to herself and Pierre, how grateful for their many acts of friendliness to a young stranger. She could trust me. Perhaps she felt in her distress that, being a writing man myself in a modest way, I might have some particular fitness for dealing with this situation.

" You're a dear boy, Alan," she said simply. " I was sure I could count on you. Very well, you shall hear everything."

And she told me everything, at least I believed this for a long time; but there came a day when I wondered whether there were not a few things that the lady had kept back.

It seems it was a quarter past ten when the novelist reached his home that night after our first dinner party. He found Blanche Launay in her boudoir lying on a chaise-longue, draped in a loose Chinese garment that Pierre liked. On a small table at her side were some cakes and wine that she had placed there, thinking to add a little cheer to this birthday occasion. Alas ! The bottle was never even opened, as she afterwards recalled.

No sooner had Launay entered the room than

his wife saw that something was wrong. Pierre was preoccupied, did not speak to her, but went directly to a window and, parting the curtains, peered down into the street as if he expected to see something there — or some one! And his eyes were shadowed by a poignant sadness.

"Of course, I was startled by this strange behavior," Madame Launay said. "I asked him what was the matter. Was he ill? Had I done anything to displease him? He said 'No' in a distraught way, and drew up a chair beside me. Then he told me he was going away. I was all excited at this because I thought he meant Egypt — a novel we have talked about. You know I'm quite thrilled by the thought of Egypt and the desert — all those inspiring places. But he said it wasn't Egypt and he couldn't take me with him, and — he was so queer — pale and distressed — that I began to be frightened. I caught his hand, clung to him, tried to draw him to me; but the sight of his face chilled me.

"'I must leave you — alone,' he said. "Oh, I can't describe how his words went right through me."

Here she broke down again.

"Please don't cry. I know it's hard, but we must face these things. Perhaps they're not as bad as they seem," I suggested. "Now let's see, you were nearly frantic when he acted so — no wonder. And you begged him to explain. Well? What did he say?

Did he tell you how he feels about his writings — about *La Louve?* "

She nodded tearfully.

" About that American girl ? "

" Miss Edwards ? Yes, it's so unjust. She was ill-balanced, you know she was, Alan."

" Of course. Did he speak of anything in the nature of — of a premonition ? "

Her eyes widened.

" Premonition ? "

In an instant I saw my mistake, and turned the matter off by speaking of the envelopes that Launay had left at our places (saying nothing about the ominous black borders) and of the exquisitely tender and appealing words in which he had begged each one of us to do some one beautiful thing in our lives, now, before it was too late.

" That makes me so happy," she murmured. " Pierre has a beautiful, noble nature. It must be that he is ill. There is no other way of accounting for it — those terrible things — an enemy lurking in the dark and — something Pierre did years ago — so he says — I don't believe it."

How beautifully the wife's love and faith came to her husband's defense !

" Did you ask what this thing was that he says he did ? "

" Indeed I did. I begged him to tell me. I said I

would forgive anything. I would stand by him, comfort him, if he would only let me know the truth."

"'Pierre,' I said, 'was it — a woman?'

"'No,' he said.

"'Was it — something violent?'

"'No!' he said.

"'You didn't — steal?'

"He said it wasn't that either. It was worse. It was something that has haunted him all these years — spoiled his life, his work. He has wanted to kill himself — often. But he said he was a coward. He was a coward that night. This confession that he must make to me, his own wife, he hadn't the courage to make it. He would go to his room and write it down, and give it to me in the morning. He said: 'Make me some coffee — strong — *veux tu?*' then he went to his room and — I made him the coffee and ——"

Here Blanche Launay burst into another flood of weeping, and for a time I almost forgot my curiosity in my sympathy for her. A truly pathetic figure, this child of fortune, fêted and protected always, who was now facing her first real trouble. It seemed heartless to question her further, but I knew I must go on.

"You must control yourself," I said. "Would you — would you mind telling me how long you and

your husband were together before he went to his room ? "

The poor lady looked up at me through tear-dimmed eyes.

" How long ? Oh, about an hour — two hours — I don't know."

I reflected that a man can say a good many things to his wife in an hour, when he is laying bare the inner chambers of his soul; when he believes he is about to die.

" Then why won't you tell me what he said — all of it ? " I pursued impatiently. " Of course, if you don't wish to tell me, if I'm intruding upon matters of too delicate a nature —— ? "

Blanche Launay shivered as if drawing away from some painful remembrance; yet with her very next breath she assured me she was keeping back nothing that I ought to know. Pierre had simply failed to give her any real cue to the mystery. He had dwelt upon his own weakness and unworthiness, upon the tortures he had suffered through his unrevealed sin, and finally upon his despair and utter indifference before the fate that threatened him. When it came to details he had always withheld the essential thing, just as he had in his talk with us.

" But that confession he was going to write ? *Did* he write it ? Did he give it to you ? "

"Yes — yes, he wrote it," she answered nervously, "he gave it to me yesterday.'"

"Well?"

There was a moment of nervous hesitation.

"I left it at home, but I know every word by heart, especially the end — it is so bitterly sad."

Slowly, and with a far away expression in her eyes, as if she were visualizing the memory of something near and dear, yet very terrible, she repeated Pierre Launay's farewell message to her: 'This is the end of the poorest story I have ever written, the story of my own life. Forgive me, my poor wife,' he wrote. 'I am weary of everything, above all my wretched self. If there were some way of escape from the fate that overhangs me, I would not wish to take it. I want to sleep. I long to forget. Good-night, my dear one. With all my unworthiness I love you. Let those be my last words.'"

Blanche Launay paused, wiping her eyes.

"The rest is mostly about his money. He explained that his estate amounts to a little over two million francs, and — he has left me half a million."

"What!"

"That doesn't matter so much — you see I have my own fortune. What hurts me is that Pierre did not trust me. He could not bring himself to tell me the truth — not all of it. He speaks of fifty thousand

francs that he has left to his five best friends — you are one of them — ' for certain indicated benevolences.' Another paragraph says: ' I will now tell you why I am leaving a million and a half francs to a man who is an entire stranger to you, but who has a claim upon me that I cannot deny.' "

" A man ? "

" Yes."

" Why is your husband leaving him this money ? "

Blanche Launay shook her head miserably, and in her harrowed face I read the bitterness of her humiliation.

" He didn't tell me after all. He promsied to tell me. I suppose he included this in his statement; but when he read it over he destroyed part of it. One sheet was torn off near the bottom and on the margin was scrawled: '*I have burned two pages that I simply cannot let you read. I am ashamed. P. L.*' So you see I know nothing. I understand nothing. I tried to question him afterward, but he got so excited that I couldn't go on. I tried to be tactful and wait for my opportunity, but it never came, and now — now it never will come. Oh, I can't bear it ! "

In the midst of this painful scene Marie Louise knocked to tell me I was wanted on the telephone. The office was calling to say that I must come immediately. My chief expected me to leave for London

on the Calais-Dover express, and I had not a moment to lose.

"I'll drop you at the office," Madame Launay offered, when I explained this.

"I'm sorry, dear lady, but they seem to be in a hurry. I wish I could think of something else. I suppose we'll just have to wait — be patient — have faith. Anyhow, I'll keep in touch with you from London, and if I am needed here you can count on me to come straight back, whether the paper likes it or not," I promised her.

"That's good of you, Alan."

"And remember, not a word to anyone about these things. We must do nothing to disgrace Pierre Launay's name. What he said was in sacred confidence."

"Of course," she sighed.

In silence we drove toward the boulevards, each busy with obsessing thoughts. As we rolled across the Pont du Carrousel I looked down into the swirling waters of the Seine, and recalled with a shiver Launay's ominous words: "If I should be drowned, for instance." Why had he said that? What in the world could have made Pierre Launay imagine that he was going to be drowned?

I could not leave Paris without seeing Marguerite, so, after telephoning from the office, I picked her up

on my way to the station, having barely time to catch my train. We were both upset by this untoward development, but there was one comforting thing, I should not be gone long, and I had been promised a rise of salary.

" Only a few weeks to wait, dear child," I assured her as we rolled along, " and with this rise — it's going to make it pretty good for us, understand ? — so when I get back *tu seras ma femme, n'est ce pas,* Margie? " I whispered.

Her eyes dimmed with tears of happiness as she snuggled close to me, and although she did not fully promise, I felt that she half promised to be my wife as soon as I returned. I know I kissed her in that spirit most of the way up the Rue Lafayette, which is a long street.

As we were approaching the station I remembered an important matter and told Marguerite as discreetly as I could that she might receive a letter from Pierre Launay — a rather startling letter.

" Startling? "

" Well, yes; it probably will be startling, if you get it."

" Alan, what do you mean? "

Of course I could not satisfy her curiosity, but I impressed it upon her that she must take the greatest care of such a letter, if it came, and let me know immediately on its receipt.

" You'd better wire me," I said. " It may be necessary for me to come back to Paris and help you with it."

" But — why would I need help? Why should M. Launay write me a letter? " she asked, thoroughly mystified.

" I don't know, dear. I haven't any idea. He just said that he might. You won't forget to let me know, *dis?* "

And she promised — she promised to wire me.

CHAPTER VI

THE TAXI-CAB

I WAS away from Paris for nearly two months after this on my newspaper assignment in London (how I hated those dreary Sundays in a Bloomsbury boarding house!) and so I was spared the shock of the tragedy when it broke; but I had quite shock enough when I picked up the Paris *Figaro* at the Café Royal five days after my arrival and read of Pierre Launay's disappearance.

Oh, my unhappy friend; my benefactor; the man I had so admired and in my humble way tried to imitate; gone! Made away with beyond question in some cunning and sinister fashion by this enemy he had told us about, this implacable figure in the gloom whose deadly *coup* Pierre Launay had both feared, and hoped for.

But how? Alas! all details were lacking. Nor was there any further information in several notes that came to me from the distracted wife during this period. She had obeyed my injunction to keep silent, she had furnished no information to anyone; but the social and literary prominence of her husband made it impossible to hide the fact that he was missing.

Madame Launay begged me to write her fully and make suggestions that occurred to me. When would I return to Paris? She felt terribly alone and missed me all the more because I was the only person to whom she could speak frankly about this tragic happening. Poor lady, what could I say?

Three weeks passed and there were no developments. The Paris police, spurred on by public clamor, made desperate efforts, searching everywhere, doing every conceivable thing to justify their reputation as shrewd investigators, and to satisfy an immense and morbid curiosity; but the mystery remained impenetrable. No trace of the missing celebrity was come upon, nor any clue to the criminal. The crestfallen *agents* were not even able to lay hands on the driver of that tragic taxi-cab. He too had disappeared and his vehicle with him. It seems this chauffeur was a private individual operating on his own account, and not connected with any one of the large taxi-cab companies.

With a pang of regret I realized that I myself must have seen this chauffeur, and I went back painstakingly in my thoughts to those last moments at the door while my friend was giving me his farewell admonitions. I recalled indistinctly a muffled figure crouched forward on the driver's seat with face quite indistinguishable in the fog and shadows.

Quite indistinguishable? Alas! If I had only been more alert.

More days passed and the chauffeur was finally identified as Jean Pitou, a rough-looking fellow with a stubby grey beard, probably an ex-soldier, as was suggested by a purplish scar across his nose and cheek. This man had occupied a room in the Rue Orfila, near the Place Gambetta, but had given up this lodging about a week before the crime, and nothing more was known of him.

A description of this chauffeur and his red and black voiture, was telegraphed all over France, with the result that highways and byways for hundreds of miles were scoured by professional and amateur detectives eager to gain the large rewards offered by the authorities and by one of the great Paris newspapers. But all in vain. Driver and taxi-cab seemed to have vanished from the earth.

For five weeks the fruitless search continued, the shrewdest men from the Prefecture being baffled in their efforts; in fact the case was about to be laid away as an unsolvable puzzle, when suddenly on a pleasant April afternoon, a fisherman, casting his line into the Seine near the Pont du Carrousel, made a gruesome discovery. He was one of that singular class of Frenchmen who are content to angle from the river bank, hour after hour, day after day with-

out ever catching anything. Now, however, this patient sportsman had his reward, *he caught a taxi-cab,* that is to say his drifting line and heavily weighted hook became attached to something extraordinary solid and unyielding there in the depths, and further investigation (involving ultimately the services of a professional diver) led to the discovery of the missing carriage. Red and black; there was no mistaking it. And inside the taxi-cab, as it lay sideways on the muddy bottom with its windows smashed in, was a crumpled-up human body.

As to the identity of the victim, there was not the slightest doubt. The clothing, a pocket book, various letters and papers of a personal and unmistakable character, not to mention articles of jewelry, a queer antique ring, and a gold bracelet clasped around the left arm above the elbow, made it certain, in spite of injuries suffered in the river, that this was the *depouille mortelle* of Pierre Launay. Madame Launay herself at the inquest (where she appeared in a state bordering on collapse (positively recognized the remains and showed a companion bracelet on her own arm graven with mystic words of a tender significance. It is all too horrible for further details.

Needless to describe the sensation that followed. It was another *cause célêbre,* destined to rank with

the most famous. Here was something new, something shockingly different from the usual criminal mysteries. Even Paris, the scene of many a ghastly novelty, had never known anything quite like this. A taxi-cab passenger driven to his death in the river by a criminal chauffeur; held prisoner by the water pressure; or a jammed door! Oh, my poor friend!

I should explain that in Paris such a crime is possible, owing to the fact that the Seine flows through the city between high stone walls along which an upper roadway runs, while from this at intervals paved ways, steeply descending, lead directly down to the torrent where huge floating structures, bathing houses and dingy clothes-washing arks, are moored among the barges. This slanting distance from the road above to the river's brink is only a few hundred feet, nor is there any barrier to such a mad dash, if a chauffeur chose to take it. No barrier? Half a minute in a foggy night would be enough. A sudden turn as the cab approached the river, a swift downward rush, a sharp swerving at the water's edge so as to hurl the car head-on into the gulf . . . a splash, perhaps a muffled cry . . . then silence. So it must have happened.

In the mind of the general public the motive back of this strange crime remained undetermined, except that it was felt to have been some perverted mania

of hatred. There was no question of robbery, for valuables to a considerable amount (including several thousand francs in money) were found upon the body. As to the missing chauffeur, some believed that he also had perished in the river and been swept down toward the sea; but most opinions were that he had escaped from the taxi-cab after its fatal plunge (or before it) and was now in hiding.

Inasmuch as the task I have set myself is to elucidate the Launay mystery, and not to detail the progress of my own romance, I have refrained from speaking of the great loneliness I suffered during this separation from Marguerite, nor have I mentioned the loving and comforting letters that I received from her almost every day during my stay in London. The moment had arrived, however, when these two threads of narrative were to be closely intertwined, as was foreshadowed in a telegram that arrived at this juncture, the telegram I had vainly expected all these weeks:

"*Important letter received. Galilee. Marguerite.*"

I may explain that Galilee was a code-word we had arranged between us, meaning that my sweetheart sent me love and kisses and all the precious treasure of her heart. My corresponding code-word was Bethlehem, and I sent this to her now as quickly as I could reach the cable office with the announcement that I would arrive in Paris the next evening.

CHAPTER VII

THE SCARRED FINGER

On pleading personal reasons, I was now permitted by my newspaper to return to my post in France, and had the joy once more of rolling down the Rue Lafayette from the Gare du Nord with my sweetheart beside me. Marguerite appeared in an early spring hat — dark blue, trimmed with poppies — which I properly admired, although I fear I rumpled it in the exuberance of my greeting. And she was so pleased, sweet child, with some handkerchiefs and gloves that I brought her from the Burlington Arcade.

We dined at Boulant's in our favourite corner where the windows overlook the Grand Boulevard and the Rue Daunou, and never did food taste better, accompanied by a bottle of friendly Barsac, and cigarettes from the little tobacco shop downstairs. Then we strolled across to the Grand Café for a demi-tasse on the Terrasse while the music played inside. It certainly was good to be back.

"And now about that letter?" I asked when we were comfortably settled, for Marguerite had stipulated that I was not to question her about this until

after dinner. Nor had she even wished to discuss Pierre Launay's death, except to repeat what she had said many times in her letters, that she was still under the shock and sadness of the whole grim affair.

"It's so horrible, dear": she pressed my hand in agitation. "And to think that I must be mixed up in this now! It wasn't kind of him. It isn't right." She was on the verge of tears. "Oh, I wish I had never sent for Pierre Launay, never seen him!"

"It certainly is strange why he felt called upon to write to you," I agreed.

"Strange? Alan, I have the strangest story to tell that you ever listened to, a story that brings in Notre-Dame Cathedral and a prowling individual with a scarred finger, and ——"

"What!" I interrupted as my mind flashed back to that scene in the corridor. "A long straight scar?"

"Why, yes."

"With bluish dots over it?"

"Yes."

"Go on! Tell me your story, then I'll tell you one."

So she told me her story, which began with two calls at her apartment during the past week by a man named Jacques Vanneau, whom she did not know, and who had come in the evening while Marguerite was out at her work. He was very insistent,

and when Therese had asked him to explain what his business was he had replied that he could tell it only to the lady herself. Finally the old attendant had directed him to the ' Folies Dramatiques ' where Marguerite was singing.

" This was the night before last," my sweetheart continued, " and when I came out, there was Jacques Vanneau waiting at the stage door. He's the sacristan at Notre-Dame, if you please, a very respectable old party who goes about in a three-cornered hat with gold braid on it, and pounds on the stone floor with a great gold-headed staff. You've seen him, *chéri,* marching up the aisle at the head of processions? "

" I know — choir boys, incense, priests chanting in bad Latin. Please hurry up, this is too exciting."

Marguerite smiled at me.

" Absurd man! I've got to tell it from the beginning, haven't I? Now be quiet. It seems that Jacques Vanneau is responsible for the orderly running of the cathedral building, keeps it clean, sees that the doors are opened and closed at the proper hours, looks after tourists, the alms boxes, the beggars, and a hundred things like that."

" A sort of church policeman! "

" Yes. And he makes it a point to open the doors himself for the early mass. He's there at six o'clock every morning — all these winter days."

"He's welcome to the job."

"Well, last Friday morning — that's a week ago to-day — Jacques Vanneau had just opened the doors and was sweeping up a little in front of the holy water font when he saw a rough-looking man come in and look around in a sort of dazed way. It was all dark and shadowy. There wasn't a soul in the church except an old woman who sells candles and two or three poor people saying their prayers.

"There was something about this stranger that gave Jacques Vanneau a fright. The fellow's eyes were queer. His face was ghastly white. He was an oldish man with a short grey beard, and he wore a workman's blouse.

"'What do you want, monsieur?' the sacristan asked, and the man mumbled something about wanting to make a confession.

"'Come back at ten o'clock,' the other directed, but the man paid no attention and went shuffling up the left-hand aisle where the confessional boxes of the chanoines are.

"Jacques Vanneau recalled various robberies this winter in Paris churches — you know there's an immense treasure in Notre-Dame, jewelled crosses, chalices of solid gold, all sorts of things like that — so his first idea was to call for help; but he realized that he might be mistaken, this might be only

some poor half-witted vaurien who had drifted in ——"

"Yes, yes?"

"So the sacristan moved along softly after this fellow down the centre aisle, where he couldn't be seen in the darkness, but would be ready for anything that might happen. *Comprends-tu?*" She bit her lip as she used this unaccustomed tutoiement, and I pretended not to notice it, although I was really overjoyed.

"I understand."

"It seems the man lingered there in the shadows for quite a long time, five or ten minutes, and M. Vanneau couldn't make out what he was doing or trying to do; but he could hear him moving about, scuffling back and forth, upsetting chairs among the confessional boxes. Then the stranger turned and came toward the door, groping his way. He walked so slowly that the sacristan was back by the holy water font ahead of the stranger. Now imagine this. There was Jacques Vanneau crouching behind a great column, watching — afraid, you understand? — waiting to see what this man would do; and there was the man shuffling along. . . ."

"What did the man do?"

"He came straight to the font and stopped. Then he stretched out his hand and dipped a finger in the holy water, then he crossed himself and ——"

"Ah! That's how Vanneau saw the hand, the scarred finger?"

"Yes, the man hesitated with his hand poised over the font, his finger stretched out, as if he were afraid to touch the holy water; so there was plenty of time for the sacristan to notice the scar. And the light from the candles on the old woman's candle table was full on the hand. Can you see the picture, *chéri?* Oh! I must tell you another thing, the sacristan noticed a cut across the man's nose, a purplish cut!"

"Jean Pitou, the chauffeur!" I cried.

Marguerite nodded.

"Not a doubt of it. He came to search for Pierre Launay's letter."

"He did? You're sure?"

"Yes, because after he had started for the door he came back and told Jacques Vanneau that a letter in a long envelope with a black seal had been lost in one of the confessional boxes; then he fished out of his pockets a hundred francs in torn and dirty notes, mostly five-franc notes that had been pasted together, and he gave these to the sacristan. 'If you find that letter, boss, keep it for me until I come back and I'll give you as much more,' he promised, speaking in a thick voice, as if he had been drinking.

"Naturally this gave Jacques Vanneau the idea of searching everywhere, and after hours of looking

he found it — where do you suppose ? In a place no one would think of — you couldn't get to it without a ladder. You see those confessional boxes are nine or ten feet high."

" Well? "

" Well the letter was on top of the fifth confessional box, lying there in the dust of ages. It was in a long envelope with a massive black seal, just as the man said. It was addressed to me, and —— "

" By gracious, you've done a big thing, Margie! " I broke in. " We'll be able to clear up this whole mystery. It was pretty decent of Vanneau to turn down that scoundrel, wasn't it? We might give him the extra hundred francs that he would have made."

" I gave him two hundred francs," said Marguerite. " And I took the responsibility of promising him a thousand, if he arrests this man when he comes back."

" A thousand! Why, *Le Matin* has offered ten thousand for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the murderer. Did you tell Jacques Vanneau who this man probably is? No? I believe it's just as well. We've got to do some studying here." I said this as I thought of the admonitions to secrecy that Pierre Launay had given us. " The main point is, we have the letter. Now then, where is it? Have you read it yet? "

She shook her head.

"You must prepare for a disappointment, dear. I haven't broken the seal; we're not going to break it — for the present."

I stared at her.

"Not going to break the seal? Why aren't we going to break it?"

"Because Pierre Launay's explicit directions forbid it. In the upper left-hand corner of the envelope is this inscription: 'Written January 27, 1924. Not to be opened until six months from this date.' And signed 'P.L.'"

"That's — that's darned annoying, isn't it?" was all I could say. Then I made a rapid calculation through the weeks. "Let's see, this is March 18th. Our last meeting with Pierre Launay was January 29th — the night of the crime — seven weeks ago. He wrote this letter two days before his death — on January 27th. Six months from January 27th is July 27th. From March 18th to July 27th is four months and nine days that we've got to wait. Say, Margie, it must be something pretty terrible that Pierre Launay has confessed to you."

Marguerite drew in a long sigh. I knew how loyal she was to Pierre Launay's memory.

"I've tried to think that he had some other reason," she said unhappily.

We sat silent for a long time, listening to the familiar apotheosis music from *Faust* and puzzling over this latest development.

"What puzzles me," I said presently, "is how Jean Pitou, assuming it was he, knew that Pierre Launay's letter was hidden in Notre-Dame."

"How do you account for the letter being there at all?" questioned Marguerite. "When Pierre Launay had written this letter, this confession or whatever it is, why didn't he simply put two stamps on it and mail it? Why all this mystery about confessional boxes?"

Here a ray of light broke through my perplexity. "I believe I've got it, Margie," I exclaimed. "Consider this — as a working hypothesis. Hold on, I must tell you first what I know from Pierre Launay himself. You've got to be *au courant* with all the facts if you're going to help me work out this puzzle."

Whereupon I gave her an account of those two memorable evenings in the Rue de Bellechasse, repeating Launay's sombre words, and dwelling on his premonition that he might be drowned.

Marguerite was profoundly impressed by all this. "It gets worse and worse," she murmured. "Poor man, how he must have suffered! What *can* it be that he did?"

"I suppose he has answered that question in his letter to you. I hope you've put it in a safe place?"

"I gave it to my uncle — he has a bijouterie in the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré — he locked it up for me in his safe. Please go on, Alan."

"Well, here's my idea. Pierre Launay had this horrible sense of shame that he told us about. He had dishonored himself. So when he had written this letter to you, say on the night of January 27th, he couldn't bring himself to mail it. He knew he was going to die, he hadn't an hour to lose; and yet, in his anguish of soul, he couldn't mail that letter. He couldn't bear to have the truth known, even after his death. So he went to Notre-Dame, perhaps on the afternoon of January 28th, with the idea of confessing to a priest. But his courage failed him again. He couldn't even confess to a priest; and finally, in despair, he compromised by hiding the letter in a spot where it might not be found for years, probably wouldn't have been, if this white-faced prowler hadn't come around looking for it. How does that strike you, Margie?"

She was quite complimentary to this reasoning, except for one thing. "It seems all right, but — how did the white-faced prowler know the letter was there?"

"I think I can answer that," I told her. "We know

this man had been following Pierre Launay for days, don't we? He probably drove Launay to Notre-Dame that afternoon, followed him inside, saw him hide the letter, but couldn't get it at the time, and came back weeks later — when the church was empty — when it was safer —— "

" But he didn't get it."

" Perhaps he forgot which confessional box it was on. There are a dozen boxes. Perhaps he knew the sacristan was watching him."

Marguerite nodded approvingly.

" It sounds plausible. Jean Pitou *did* follow Pierre Launay; he followed him into the corridor that night at the Rue de Bellechasse, didn't he? "

" He certainly did. Oh! Did the sacristan see this man as he went away? "

Marguerite thought a moment.

" Why, yes, I remember. Jacques Vanneau went to the church door and saw the man climb into an empty vegetable cart that was standing there and drive off. It was one of those carts with two high wheels and a big sleepy horse that come pounding down the Champs Elysées very early in the morning loaded with cabbages, parsnips, turnips. You've seen them, *chéri?* "

" I know. And was this man alone in the cart? There wasn't anyone waiting for him? "

" Why — I didn't think of asking."

CHAPTER VIII

WAS IT OUR DUTY TO SPEAK?

THE next morning there came another piece of startling news, given out by Pierre Launay's lawyer, to the effect that the author had left a million and a quarter francs — more than half of his fortune — to an unknown person named Emile Bigot, a man no one had ever heard of, on condition that he present himself to claim this bequest within ninety days; failing which the money went to the widow, Blanche Launay. This announcement was afforded wide publicity, as specifically directed in the will.

That same afternoon I received a *petit bleu* from the senator informing me that I was urgently needed at a conference with my fellow executors (so we had been officially named) to be held the following evening. Accordingly we five duly assembled in the Rue de Bellechasse and spent several hours in consultation, the immediate question being whether it was our duty, in view of this new development, to take any steps for the protection of Madame Launay.

"We are facing an extraordinary situation, gentlemen," remarked the Senator who had constituted himself an informal chairman. "We know from Pierre Launay himself that he was hated with a

deadly hatred by some unknown man. We know that our poor friend expected to be murdered by this unknown man. And we know that he was murdered."

"If we had only taken his words more seriously and watched over him, guarded him," sighed the doctor.

"It's too late to think of that. But it's not too late to think of Emil Bigot. Who is Bigot? An unknown man. An individual who is about to emerge from the shadows and claim the bulk of Pierre Launay's fortune. Why? What has Bigot ever done to entitle him to this rich reward? An entire stranger. Gentlemen, here is an astonishing development. What shall be our attitude toward Bigot? Are we to allow him to despoil our friend's widow? Are we to believe that he is involved in this sinister affair?"

"Not a doubt of it. I believe he's the murderer," opined the rich man's son.

"Not so fast, my young friend," reproved the priest. "It is unwise to make such a statement without proofs."

"Excuse me, Father, but anyone with the intelligence of a school-boy can put these facts together. You must admit there's a strong presumption of guilt against Bigot."

" I don't see that. A certain person is left a million and a half francs and you say he's a probable assassin? Why? "

" There wouldn't be *two* mysteries in one man's life at the same time, would there? If Bigot isn't guilty, we have two mysteries — the murder and the will. I say that's absurd. They go together. It was hate that made Bigot kill Launay. It was remorse that made Launay leave a fortune to Bigot. Launay was remorseful for the thing that made Bigot hate him. *Voila!* "

" Then you think Bigot will turn out to be the missing chauffeur? " I asked.

" Of course Bigot may have paid some other man to help him, but in my opinion he was responsible."

" I agree with that," said the senator.

Here the doctor intervened. " I've had some experience, gentlemen, in police cases — autopsies and so on; I have frequently testified as an expert at murder trials, and I have always found that criminals of extraordinary intelligence work alone. They have no accomplices."

" Anyway, I believe we have enough circumstantial evidence against Emile Bigot to establish a case against him," persisted the senator, and the rich man's son was of the same mind.

But the priest gave a new turn to the situation:

" Gentlemen," he said gravely, " you forget that

our lips are sealed. Even if we had positive proof, we could not make it public without violating Pierre Launay's instructions. We are not even at liberty to tell his widow of our suspicions."

"Launay probably told her himself. At any rate Madame Launay is an intelligent woman. She will make her own deductions. Let her contest the will and call us as witnesses," this from the senator.

But the priest objected. "Suppose she did that? Suppose Madame Launay won her case? Suppose Bigot were proved guilty? What does that imply? The revelation of the murderer's motive. The betrayal of our friend's secret. The ruin of his reputation. We should have done the one thing that Launay charged us not to do, the thing that he died to avoid."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," conceded the politician.

"Haven't you overlooked one point?" put in the doctor. "I mean the ninety day clause in the will? If Emile Bigot is really the murderer he will be afraid to come forward and claim the bequest; in which case the money goes to the widow."

The senator demurred. "Ha! If Bigot believes there is no proof against him, he will take the risk. A million and a half is a sum of money."

"You forget that his motive was hate — not greed. If he had only wanted money he could have

had it from Pierre without killing him," said the priest.

"Then you don't think Emile Bigot will come forward, Father?" I asked.

"Not if he is the assassin."

And the doctor agreed to this. "I have the same intuition; if this man is guilty, he will be afraid to show himself."

"According to that," laughed the rich man's son, "the best way for Bigot to prove his innocence is to come forward and accept a fortune. Too easy!"

So the discussion continued, sometimes impatiently, back and forth, and at the end of the evening we were unable to reach a conclusion. We all agreed, however, that we must take no action, certainly none that was against our friend's instructions, unless we were unanimous about it. We adjourned, therefore, with nothing accomplished, and arranged to meet again in two weeks, unless some sudden happening or development should call for an earlier gathering.

As a matter of fact, within three days there came such a happening, and the telephone wires were kept busy carrying the news of it to our several homes, namely the news that Emile Bigot, emerging from the shadows, had appeared at the lawyer's office to claim his million and a half francs.

CHAPTER IX

EMIL BIGOT

EMIL BIGOT turned out to be the most entertaining person I ever met, although it has been my privilege to associate with men of parts. An appalling liar, and inordinately vain, yet so amusing and usually unmalicious, that you easily forgave him. In a convivial gathering Bigot would repeat a personal experience already related by one of the others in the group, but he would so glorify it, embroider around it, that the father of the original story would scarcely recognize his own child. Suppose the tale was a hackneyed one about a Methodist deacon at a Chicago prayer meeting; Bigot would improvise this into a thrilling adventure in Constantinople when he and a Russian Grank Duke, travelling incognito, stole their way into a sacred mosque at night. He was an artist.

Also he was a drunkard, but one of the kind who can keep sober. He had been everywhere, knew everybody, understood everything. In spite of yourself, you almost believed him, for he had that rare attraction called magnetism. He would have made an ideal real estate operator, a great poker player,

a supreme confidence man. I believe he could have started some kind of a new religion and got away with it.

Of course he was intelligent, infernally intelligent. Nor did his intelligence always express itself in a trivial or unworthy manner. He could be serious, tender, deeply sincere (or apparently so) on occasions; he could be anything that he wished to be. I have rarely met a more gifted man; yet there was always something in the hard keenness of his eye, the curl of his lip, the elusiveness of his smile that left one unconvinced, vaguely distrustful. He came near to being great, but was not.

I did not see Emile Bigot before his external regeneration. I missed him in the drunken vagabond stage — assuming that there was one. When I had my first talk with him he had already received a substantial sum from Launay's lawyer, and the miracle that may be wrought in a man's appearance by a tailor, a few Turkish baths and a well-filled pocket book, had been accomplished. He was now a clean-shaven, red-faced, rather portly and prosperous-looking individual with an impressive dome. Also pale blue eyes, sandy eyebrows, and some wisps of yellow hair that made a discouraged effort against encroaching baldness. He was about fifty, and the first impression he made upon you was one of com-

pelling unusualness; the last was that here was a wreck of magnificent opportunity.

I had my first experience of Bigot's proclivity to tell whopping lies in connection with an adventure of his in Tokio during one of the great earthquakes.

" When the first shock came," he told me, " I was sound asleep at the Hôtel d'Angleterre where I had a handsome suite. In an instant I was awake. I realized the danger. I knew there was not a second to lose. In another minute the whole building might be crashing down upon us. In another minute — as a matter of fact — one wing did crash down.

" So I gave no thought to important documents in my trunk, nor to valuable jewelry, but made one wild leap through my window, out into the night — you understand I was on the first floor — and by good luck I landed safely among some rose bushes.

" Well, there I was in my pink pyjamas, barefooted, with scenes out of Dante's *Inferno* going on all about me. Screams, curses, cries of despair, indescribable confusion, and the black sky lurid with flames! Then came explosions as the earth ripped into deep fissures and the gas-mains burst. I moved away slowly from the crumbling walls and watched the picture. I didn't miss a detail. Artistic appreciation, you understand?

" But suddenly I realized that in my excitement I

had left my false teeth under the bed, where I usually put them."

"Under the bed?"

"Exactly. It's convenient. You see I always read myself to sleep, and at the very last moment as I feel that delicious drowsiness stealing over me, I slip out my teeth, extinguish the light and drop off into slumber. Whereas, if I bothered to get out of bed and put them in a glass of water I should drive that drowsiness away. It's an idea of my own."

Bigot smiled at me engagingly, and I reflected that his false teeth were surprisingly like genuine ones — they showed defective places, blackened spots and irregularities. Still it seemed unlikely that a man would say his teeth were false, unless they really were.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Do? I decided to get my teeth, earthquake or not. You understand I was on my way to Pekin where a council of Elder Statesmen were expecting me in connection with an engineering contract, a matter involving millions. And my steamer was sailing the next day.

"Well, as I told you," he continued, "the other wing had crumbled, but this one was still intact so I rushed back into the building and there I met Ito, my devoted servant, carrying out my clothes and valuables. Faithful fellow!

" ' Ito! ' I called, and in a few words explained the situation; whereupon Ito informed me that my suite had been pre-empted by a fat old Chinese princess, an exceedingly rich woman whose feet had been bound in childhood, so she couldn't walk. It seems her attendants, at the first alarm, had rescued this lady from the tumbling wing and had carried her into my rooms, weeping hysterically, and laid her on my bed. It was her cries that were now enlivening the night.

" ' But I must get in there for a minute, I absolutely *must*,' said I.

" Ito assured me this was impossible. The lady was of Imperial blood and could not be disturbed under any circumstances.

" ' Imperial blood or not, we'll disturb her,' said I. Then I gave him instructions, with a thousand-yen note thrown in. And five minutes later I had my teeth. How? Why I had Ito dash along the corridor, yelling at the top of his voice that this wing was collapsing, too, and for everybody to run or jump for their lives. The Chinese lady fell for this *rengaine* and had herself carried out *grande vitesse*. Ha! " Bigot concluded. " That's what I call facing an emergency."

I showed myself duly impressed by this recital, but a few days later I learned on unimpeachable authority, namely from my own dentist on the Avenue de

l'opera, whom I had recommended to Bigot, that this genial prevaricator *had no false teeth at all!* And I doubt if he was ever near an earthquake.

During this period I frequented Bigot assiduously (it was after he went to live at the Hôtel Ritz), partly because he fascinated me — I found him a wonderful type to study — and chiefly because it was borne in upon me more and more that he *was* the assassin of Pierre Launay. This conviction remained with me in spite of the man's indisputable charm and plausibility, in spite of the fact that there was not the slightest sign of a scar or unusual mark on any of Bigot's fingers. I was able to ascertain this in the course of one of our Haroun al Raschid expeditions (as he jocosely styled them) through the night-jungle of Montmartre. On this occasion I waited until the proper moment in his drinking, then managed to read his hand, giving him a patter of plausibly improvised information about extraordinary adventures, perils, successes that I claimed to see in his palm-lines, especially one brilliant coup that had brought him a fortune. I couldn't resist this little fling, taking advantage of the fact that he was finishing a second bottle.

This rather sobered Bigot.

"Where do you see that?" he wanted to know.

"There! That triangle on the Mount of Saturn. Let

me see the other hand. Yes, it's there, too, but not so plain."

As I spoke I spread his fingers well apart and made sure there was no straight bluish cicatrix anywhere upon them. He certainly was *not* the *louche* individual who had tugged against me that night at the corridor door. Nothing remarkable about his hands, except that the stubby fingers were not scrupulously clean.

"What foolishness," scoffed Bigot.

"Not at all. And here is something else," I boldly announced. "Extraordinary! A cross within a circle." (I was appropriating Marguerite's formula.) "In all my experience I've met this combination only twice. And both times — never mind that."

I simulated a reluctance to continue, but Bigot insisted, his little eyes on me keenly.

"I see an illness, a great danger, a beautiful lady," I predicted, and thus, blunderingly, as the future was to prove, scored a bull's-eye of prophecy.

Bigot laughed loudly.

"Excellent, my boy! It won't be the first time I've braved the first two for the sake of the third. *Vive les jolies femmes!*"

One afternoon, while we were sitting at Bigot's favorite table in the Ritz bar-room, drinking champagne cocktails and nibbling at Saratoga chips, I sug-

gested that he ought to write a book of his adventures.

"Talk about *The Three Musketeers!* You could bring d'Artagnan up to date."

"Ha! D'Artagnan up to date! Excellent. I suppose I could. A London publisher offered me five thousand pounds for my experiences with Rasputine. And my Chinese stuff. Ah!"

"Have you ever written anything?"

"Never. I've been far too busy living. Books bore me — except autobiographies. Novel writing is the lowest of the arts. Architecture, music, portrait painting — yes; but novels, bah!"

"What do you think of Pierre Launay's work?"

Bigot lifted his shoulders in an indulgent shrug.

"You know I loved Pierre. I honor his memory, and all that, but I needn't tell you, my dear fellow, that his work was trash — done for money. I believe he wrote one pretty little thing — sentimental — I forget the title."

On this and other occasions I questioned Emile Bigot about crime and remorse, particularly in reference to Launay's assassination. He was sure this crime had been committed by a person of superior intelligence and would therefore remain a mystery. Most criminals were stupid. As to remorse he thought this was a question of temperament and physical health. Certain persons could commit crimes without suffer-

ing remorse. Others not. He said all this with perfect calm and intellectual detachment. It seemed impossible that this brilliant *causeur* could be the man who called himself Jean Pitou, driver of that ill-fated taxicab. And yet . . . in his presence I was never free from an intuition of evil.

I gradually gained Bigot's confidence, largely by appealing to his egotism, and whenever it was possible I got him to talk about his friendship for Pierre Launay, the main question being (I always brought this in as if by accident) *why* the novelist had left him this large sum of money. Bigot realized that he must give a plausible explanation of this extraordinary bequest, and he gradually invented one. A very simple story which, nevertheless, he did not tell straight out, but by insinuations, bit by bit, with the air of one who drags forth the great sorrow of his life.

Many years ago, according to his story, Pierre Launay had done Bigot an irreparable wrong in connection with a woman, and had wished to make atonement for this. When I tried to find out who this woman was, whether wife or sweetheart, Bigot became evasive. These memories were too agonizing to be gone into, he said. I did not believe one word of this explanation, nor did the other executors when I repeated it to them; we all felt that it was pure invention.

Nor did I accept various veiled references that he made to Marguerite Mayol. What did he know about her? Why did he refer mysteriously to Marguerite and to her father in the life-story that he was piecing together for my benefit? I have since concluded that this was simply a mystification meant to worry me. And it did. He knew I was interested in Marguerite — I must have hinted as much during one of our hectic evenings — and his brazen effrontery did the rest. Still, I could not help asking myself with vague misgivings whether it was conceivable that the Mayols could be mixed up in this strange affair. Of course not. The thing was preposterous. And yet . . . there was that letter. Pierre Launay said he had written to Marguerite. Why had he written her that letter?

On various occasions I tried to draw Bigot out about the taxi-cab and the suspected chauffeur.

" I suppose hatred was the motive for this crime? " I asked him one day.

" Probably," he agreed.

" I wonder if Pierre Launay realized his danger? " I ventured.

" Ha! I hadn't thought of that. What a torture of suspense, if he did! A fascinating conception. To know that a man is dogging your footsteps day and night, waiting for just the right moment to strike you down, to destroy you —— "

Bigot's face began to grow red.

"But Launay would have protected himself, wouldn't he? That is, unless ——"

I searched into those little squinting eyes.

"Unless what?"

"Unless he *wanted* to be destroyed."

"Bon dieu! You ought to go in for the drama, young man. You've created a masterpiece of horror. Two old friends driving around for days in a taxicab, one planning to kill the other, *and the other knowing it!* What a situation! To chat casually with your future murderer, to tell him where to drive you, then to tip him generously as he says: 'Merci, Monsieur,' and you catch the gleam in his eye!"

With this I caught a gleam in Bigot's own eyes; but it instantly subsided, and he changed the subject.

One day while we were playing billiards at the Grand Café (he loved billiards and was skilful in devising weird three-cushion effects), I indulged in some rambling speculations as to whether I myself or Bigot or any trained reasoner would have been clever enough, in Pierre Launay's place, to foresee the exact fate toward which this enemy was leading him. Would I, for example, have divined that the chauffeur meant to drown me in the river? How could I have been sure that he did not intend to shoot me, say by turning suddenly on the driver's seat and aiming through the window?

" The noise would have betrayed him," Bigot objected. " The drowning plan was safer, more ingenious."

" Yes, but would I have known this in advance? Would I have even understood why this killer chose to operate a taxi-cab at all? "

Bigot nodded approvingly.

" Fascinating problems, my son, especially for a creative mind."

" Horrible problems."

" Not if a man is weary of life. Not if a man has been living in hell . . . for years. Perhaps this was a relief to Pierre Launay — an amusement. Ha! Think of a great novelist actually constructing in advance the story of his own assassination. Watching the preliminaries unfold, one by one, as an artist, eh? "

I stared at Bigot in astonishment. He was looking at me, yet his gaze passed through me, beyond me. He was beginning to breathe rapidly. His fingers were moving ever so slightly with light little clutches. His face was purple.

And he went on:

" No doubt the true solution came to Pierre Launay in a flash, perhaps on a dark rainy night while his enemy was driving him over one of the Paris bridges. Fancy him looking down into the flood and suddenly sensing the truth that he was to die in those

rushing waters! To finish his unhappy career under six or eight metres of sweeping river! *Perhaps the very next day!* Can you imagine that? Can you?" He almost screamed the words.

This outburst seemed to exhaust my companion, for a little later he begged me to excuse him and went to his apartment. He said he must rest.

I had not spent many days in Bigot's society before I discovered that he was proud of a power which he claimed to possess (and really did possess) over the gentler sex. Without putting it exactly into boastful words, he let me understand that he had never exerted himself to arouse a sentimental interest in some fair one without achieving a measure of success. Poor old bald-headed fakir, I reflected. But my feelings changed to annoyance and a vague apprehension when he began to question me about Blanche Launay. She had been away from Paris for six weeks or so, seeking solace for her sorrows in the Riviera sunshine. A recent letter told me of her return and desire to see me.

"You know Madame Launay quite well?" he asked.

"Yes. She and her husband have been very kind to me."

"Treated you like a member of the family, eh? I had an experience like that once in Copenhagen.

What a woman! " His little eyes blinked rapidly under his yellow brows. " I understand she is quite beautiful — I mean Madame Launay? Blonde or brunette? "

" Blonde."

" I like blondes. I don't know whether I like them better than brunettes, but I like them."

" I suppose you like them all."

This amused him.

" Well said, my gallant friend. Remember this, life is short and the time we spend with the ladies is never wasted. I believe Madame Launay is much younger than Pierre? Would you judge her to be about thirty-five? "

" Why — er — about that."

" I must call on her — pay my respects. That is only fitting under the circumstances. Perhaps you will be kind enough to accompany me some afternoon? "

CHAPTER X

UNDER SEAL

THERE was another stormy session in the Rue de Bellechasse when I reported these developments. Three hours of discussion that at times became acrimonious left us still in disagreement. I'm afraid I lost my temper entirely at one moment when my Irish impulsiveness got the better of me. The doctor shared my feeling that we could not let this cynical *farceur* triumph all along the line; we must take some action against him. But the priest stood firm in opposition to this, and convinced the other two executors that Pierre's last words put an inviolable duty of silence upon us.

"Do you mean to say we are not allowed to warn Madame Launay against receiving this scoundrel?" I asked indignantly.

"We can warn her in a general way."

"That won't do any good. I know Madame Launay. She will insist on seeing Bigot if he asks for an interview. As a matter of fact he has asked for it."

"Then I'm afraid she'll have to see him."

"Her husband's murderer! It's horrible. You may say I'm not sure of it; but I am sure enough. So are

you all. I don't suppose it's fitting for me to oppose my elders and betters. I'm sorry; only don't you see, Bigot will tell her this disgusting lie about how Pierre stole some woman from him and broke his heart — ruined his life. That will just about finish her. See here, don't you men think Madame Launay has had sorrow enough without that? "

The rich man's son seemed to waver at my appeal and said, " I'd like to protect Madame Launay — if we can."

" There's no *if* about it," I declared, being now thoroughly aroused. " We've got to protect her. He's capable of making love to her."

The priest was evidently shocked at this possibility. " If he dared —— " he began, but I cut him short in youthful impetuousness.

" He'd dare anything. He's the devil. He will do it just to amuse himself. You'll see."

CHAPTER XI

INCOMPREHENSIBLE WOMAN

In spite of my sense of revulsion I was forced to yield, and a few days later I called at the Ritz for Emile Bigot and presented him to Madame Launay. She herself had requested this, on learning of Bigot's desire, and when I demurred, saying that I did not think he was a person she ought to meet, she answered irritably that she wished to see him. And so it came about.

I have no idea what Bigot said to Blanche Launay on this occasion, nor how he worked upon her feelings. I simply know that she was less cordial toward me than usual when I called the next day.

It was just as I had feared; in spite of the abnormal situation that existed between them, Madame Launay was favorably impressed with Bigot. She found him sympathetic, wonderfully intelligent. A magnetic personality. She admired his brilliant conversational gifts.

"You know he speaks of Pierre beautifully. He says France has suffered an irreparable loss. I've seen tears in his eyes."

"Hypocrite!"

"That's unkind. I know he is sincere. A woman can tell."

"Not when a man has studied his effects, as Bigot has. There isn't a sincere thing about him. He's a shrewd, cold, cruel ——"

"Alan!"

"You wait and see. I know what I'm talking about. Well, did he explain why Pierre Launay left him this money — a million and a quarter that ought to be yours?"

I observed the lady attentively, thinking that this thrust must surely have touched her in a vulnerable point; but she answered composedly, without a trace of animosity against Bigot.

"Naturally, he told me."

I was startled by her self-possession, and my curiosity was intensely stirred.

"You mean you know why Pierre Launay gave away your fortune to a stranger?"

"M. Bigot was not a stranger. He was an old friend."

"Oh, a friend! Really, I can't understand you, Madame."

She looked at me reproachfully.

"You know very well that a great wrong was done to M. Bigot — something that Pierre bitterly regretted."

"Yes, but ——"

" M. Bigot behaved with the utmost delicacy. As soon as he learned that I did not know the nature of this wrong, he impressed upon me that there were reasons of a very special nature why his lips must be sealed, reasons having to do with my husband's good name. Also, he did not wish to make me suffer. At the same time he recognized that I had a right — as Pierre's widow, the one who has suffered most cruelly —— "

" Fakir! " I muttered.

" Alan, I forbid you to speak like that. You don't understand."

" Well then, tell me why your husband gave Bigot this money. I don't believe Bigot explained it."

Blanche Launay hesitated.

" He did explain it — fully. But first he cautioned me that I must take the responsibility —— "

" Responsibility for what? "

" For making him tell this. ' I warn you, Madame,' he said in the kindest way, ' that you are increasing the burden of your grief; but if you insist —— ' Well, I did insist."

" And he told you? "

" Yes."

Madame Launay looked at me sorrowfully; she realized that I felt hurt at her reticence, especially after the trust she had reposed in me.

" Alan, don't be offended. I value your sympathy,

your friendship, you know I do; but I simply cannot bring myself to tell this thing, neither to you nor to anyone."

"Is it so excessively painful as that?"

She bowed her head pathetically.

"It is so painful that — I would rather give up *all* my fortune than have it known."

In spite of my chagrin at her unwillingness to trust me, my heart went out to Blanche Launay as she stood there, trying to be brave. A slender, tragic figure in her black dress, and her face so white.

"But you have no evidence that this is true. You have only Bigot's word for it."

"I know it's true."

"Bigot is a hopeless liar. He told me the thing was a woman affair."

"That's not true."

"I don't say it is, but that's what he told me."

"I know," she said quietly, "but that was only to satisfy the executors. He didn't tell you who the woman was, did he? He didn't give you her name or go into any details?"

"Well, no," I admitted.

"You see. It was because there was no woman affair. He hadn't the heart to tell you the truth."

"Heart?" I scoffed. "Do you think Emile Bigot has any heart? You say he didn't tell us this thing be-

cause it was too painful? But he told it to you, didn't he? You, the one who would be most pained by it. Don't you see how absurd that is? "

" He told me because he recognized my right to know the truth about my husband," Madame Launay answered with dignity. " I took the responsibility."

" But you're not going to accept Bigot's word for a thing as important as this, are you? You want proofs, don't you? You're going to insist upon definite, legal proofs of this terrible wrong that he talks about, aren't you? "

Blanche Launay wavered.

" I — I don't think so. What is the good of proofs? This thing could never be made public — I wouldn't consent. Besides, what M. Bigot says is convincing. He couldn't have invented such a story — nobody could."

" But — there's a fortune involved."

She shook her head wearily.

" A fortune isn't involved. M. Bigot has this money and I want him to keep it. He's entitled to it."

Whereupon I lost my self-control entirely and blurted out: " Good Lord! You don't mean to tell me you're going to sit by meekly and let him get away with this thing when — when he may have been mixed up in the affair? "

At these indiscreet words, which escaped in my ex-

asperation, Madame Launay threw me a startled glance.

" You're not accusing M. Bigot of having anything to do with — my husband's death? "

" I'm not accusing anybody, only —— "

" You are; it's unjust — unless you have evidence. Have you? "

" Not exactly, but —— "

The poor lady interrupted me impatiently.

" This only shows how important it is to find out who committed this crime. I'm not going to be helpless any longer. The police have failed. The executors have done nothing. I'm going to take charge of the matter myself."

" You'd better get Bigot to help you," I retorted angrily.

" Perhaps I will," she rejoined.

CHAPTER XII

THREE SCALLOPED WINGS

I DID not see Blanche Launay again for several weeks, being hurt by her refusal to accept my judgment about Bigot; also I thought she might have told me what she meant by saying that she now proposed to attend personally to the matter of finding out who had slain her husband. A rather absurd announcement, for it did not seem likely that a woman alone could do more than the whole Paris police department. On the whole I decided that my only dignified course was to wait until the capricious lady chose to send for me.

I also left Bigot to his own devices during this period, largely because of a new and momentous idea that had taken possession of me; I had suddenly decided to see what I myself could do toward solving the Launay mystery. I was not a detective and did not regard myself as particularly clever, but I might accomplish something by using ordinary common sense and the methods of intelligent persistence which form a reporter's stock-in-trade. At any rate I could try.

I began by putting myself as well as I could in the

place of the murderer on that dark foggy night, and decided that if I had been Jean Pitou, chauffeur of the doomed taxi-cab, I would certainly have gone into the river along with the vehicle. I would never have been able to drive down that steep slope from the roadway to the water's edge and then jump in time to save myself.

The cab was found at the bottom of the river, ten yards out, so it must have gone in at a good speed, which called for skilful steering; that is, the driver had to swing his wheel sharply at the very last moment. He must have taken the plunge and saved himself by swimming, leaving his victim to perish inside the cab.

If I were correct in this reasoning, Jean Pitou must have come ashore drenched to the skin, probably without his cap, certainly an object of suspicion to night-watchmen who patrol these parts alert for river-thieves. But under these circumstances would he have come ashore at all and risked arrest? Would he not rather have made his escape down the Seine, either by stealing a skiff, or perhaps by hiding in one of several coal barges that were made fast to the river-wall on this particular night and at this particular point, as I took pains to verify?

Pursuing this theory, I investigated three of these barges and, after patient questioning and the expenditure of a hundred francs or so in tips, found my

search narrowed down to an honest-looking fellow, Jacques Marigot, a wiry Breton, captain of the broad-nosed river-scow *Juliette B.*, who, after hesitations and evasions, finally admitted that he had been anchored at the fatal spot on the night of the crime and might be able to tell me something of importance.

" But I don't want to be mixed up in a police affair," he stipulated.

" You needn't be. I'll protect you," I assured him. " Besides, the police aren't in this — probably won't be. I'm working alone."

I finally gained Marigot's confidence and he invited me into the spacious cabin where he and his young wife and two small children had their river-home. Everything was clean and neat, with flowers about, and spic and span curtains at the windows.

" I can tell you, Monsieur, that you have come to the right place," he began without any further urging; in fact he was evidently eager to tell his story. " The man who did that taxi-cab job climbed out of the river and hid himself in the hold of this vessel."

" Ah! "

" Oui, Monsieur. I know what I'm talking about. I saw him."

" Saw the — the murderer? "

" I didn't see his face, but I saw the man — saw him swimming."

" Swimming — where? "

"At Rouen — the next night. We lay over there after Paris, and this fellow was tucked away in one of my bunkers — that's how he escaped. I heard him prowling about on deck at four in the morning, and was up there in a jiffy — I thought it was a river-thief — with my electric flash and my pistol."

"Well?"

"Well, as I crept up I saw dimly in the shadows the figure of a man standing near the rail, looking down into the water. He started to climb over and I called out to him to stop, or I'd shoot; but he paid no attention, and a minute later he was hanging by one hand from the gunwale, sort of kicking around with his feet down below. I couldn't make out what he was trying to do, so I rushed up, flashing my light.

"'*Voleur!*' I yelled, 'I've got you now!' and I'd have had him all right only something caught my eye — just a little thing, but it made me lose a few seconds."

"What thing? Go on!" I urged.

"It was his hand, the hand he was hanging by, understand? I don't mean his hand so much as one of his fingers. I had my flash down close so I could see this finger plainly, and ——"

"Wait; it was a gentleman's hand, wasn't it?" I questioned eagerly.

Marigot nodded.

" And there was a long scar on the middle finger, a straight white line with bluish dots over it — *was there?* "

The boatman stared at me.

" You promise I'm not to be mixed up in this? "

I promised again.

" Well, you're right, Monsieur. That's just the way it was. *Sacré tonnere!* I never saw a finger marked like that before."

I recalled my own startled feelings when I myself had seen that queerly scarred finger that night at Pierre Launay's studio. Who could doubt that it was the same one?

" Then you didn't do anything? "

The boatman stroked his bronzed cheek ruefully.

" I didn't shoot until this fellow had splashed into the river and was striking out for shore like mad. Then I fired at him, but — I was all upset, Monsieur, at the thought of being such a silly fool. Besides, it was dark."

" You couldn't see his face? "

" No, Monsieur, only his head, bobbing up and down. I popped away twice, but — *voilà!* "

He threw out his hands apologetically.

" What makes you think this man was the murderer? Perhaps he *was* a river-thief."

The barge captain touched a finger to his lips mysteriously.

"I'll show you something that proves what I say. Look, Monsieur!"

Marigot opened the door of a deep wardrobe and produced triumphantly a heavy coat set with metal buttons such as chauffeurs wear.

"You see? He left this behind. I found it later on rolled up in the skiff. That's what he was doing while he hung from the gunwale — throwing this bundle into the skiff. It was moored alongside."

"Why should he do that?" I asked sceptically.

"Perhaps the weight bothered him for swimming."

This did not strike me as a convincing reason, for why should a murderer, anxious to escape, be at pains to leave a piece of evidence that must be used against him? Why not pitch the coat into the river and let it drift out to sea? Why roll it up carefully and drop it into the skiff? If Bigot did this, he did it for some good reason, but I could not imagine what his reason was.

"Would you mind letting me have this coat?" I asked the river-man, at the same time tactfully displaying a fifty-franc note.

After some reflection (quickened by the thought of this reward) Marigot handed over the garment, saying he was glad to be rid of any further responsibility in the matter.

I wrapped the coat in a newspaper and went back to my room, wondering what chance there was here of tracing the owner through some indication sewn or stamped inside by the tailor or shop-keeper who had handled it. Unfortunately these chauffeurs' coats are turned out by the thousand.

I presently found, however, that I was better off than I imagined; in fact I had secured a real prize, for on making a closer inspection of the jacket I came upon something hard in an inside breast pocket and drew forth a strange object, irregularly shaped, a piece of light metal painted and enamelled in delicate flesh colors. After puzzling over this I suddenly realized it was a mask such as mutilated soldiers wear, those unfortunates who have suffered disfiguring facial injuries. It was made of aluminium and was executed with considerable artistic skill.

There was a spring inside a false nose, that held the mask in place, just as eye-glasses are held, and when I tried it on I saw that the flesh tints of the mask merged almost imperceptibly into the real face coloring! Also, skilfully painted on the mask, was a purplish-white line that ran across the nose and down the right cheek, with the convincing effect of a deep scar. Evidently the wearer had sought to disguise himself as a disfigured victim of the war, whereas he really was not disfigured at all.

It was now sufficiently plain that Launay's mur-

derer had no scar on his face at all, but had given himself a false appearance by the use of this realistically painted shell. There arose, however, the vexing question why a man clever enough to have prepared this elaborate disguise (say a man as clever as Emile Bigot) could have been careless enough to leave the mask behind him? Why did he not destroy it, bury it, sink it in the river, do anything with it except leave it in that chauffeur's coat where it must inevitably be found for his discomfiture?

Or was it conceivable that Jean Pitou *wished* the mask to be found? Why? In vain I racked my brain to find some explanation. There was none; there could be none. The chauffeur must have blundered, or been constrained by some extraordinary happening to leave this evidence behind. But I was unable to imagine what this happening could have been.

Whatever the truth was behind this puzzling development, it was evidently my task now to seek for the maker of this aluminum mask, which ought not to be a difficult thing, since the mask-making trade must be a limited one, especially in high-class work like this.

I found upon inquiry that there were three places in Paris where masks for disfigured soldiers were made, and at two of these I was referred to a Greek artist, X. Stanopoulos, in the Street of the Four

Winds, near the Odeon Theatre, as the craftsman who must have turned out this fine specimen. There was no one in the business, I was assured, who possessed his skill.

But when I called on X. Stanopoulos, after finally locating him in a dingy rez-de-chaussée where he had his studio, I was met by a crafty smile and a polite denial of responsibility for the mask. The Greek was lost in admiration for its various excellencies, its lightness, admirable coloring, delicate modelling; but he was regretfully obliged to inform me that the honor of this workmanship was not his, although he would have been proud to claim it.

Before I left him I was satisfied that X. Stanopoulos was lying. He had some good reason for denying the authorship of this mask. I read this in the shifty glances that he cast in the direction of his wife, a fat and greasy woman with a red handkerchief bound around her glossy black hair.

"It doesn't matter who made it," I said. "The point is I want one like this for a masquerade ball. Could you make me one — say for a thousand francs?" I threw out the sum carelessly.

At the mention of a thousand francs X. Stanopoulos' manner changed to a greedy obsequiousness and we soon had struck a bargain, the arrangement being that I was to come back in a week to have

necessary wax impressions made. He promised me such a mask as had never been seen; but I must wait a week. He was a slow and careful worker and had other orders. I read in his cunning eyes that there was quite a different reason for this delay, but dissembled my suspicion.

A week later I kept my appointment and was given three sittings, on three successive days, during which wax impressions (also photographs) of my features were taken and various rectifications made in what was to be a mask of supreme life-likeness.

"No one will ever dream that it is a mask; your dearest friend will never recognize you," the Greek promised me with his oily smile, and I may say at once that he kept his word and produced a facial disguise that was a real work of art.

Of course I was making this effort and risking my money entirely in the hope that I could finally induce this rascal, perhaps by appealing to his vanity or greed or both, to tell me the truth about the other mask. I have always been rather stubbornly persevering in following my intuitions, and have often regretted it, but in this instance I was fortunately led, for at our last sitting, X. Stanopoulos, completely won over apparently, confessed that he had deceived me in his original statement. He *was* the maker of the mask that I had brought to him. I must forgive

him for this equivocation. He made it a rule to protect his customers, but I was such a perfect gentleman, so appreciative of good craftsmanship and so generous (referring to an extra hundred francs) that he could no longer refuse to satisfy my curiosity — of course in strictest confidence.

"Of course," I agreed. "Now about this man you made the mask for — you remember him well?"

"I do."

"He had no scars on his face?"

"No more than you have," grinned the Greek.

"Could you describe him to me?"

"I can do better than that, Monsieur, I can show him to you. I took several photographs of him — with and without the mask. Would you like to see them?"

I told him I certainly should, and as he reached up to a shelf and searched among a row of dusty albums I tingled with excitement at the thought that I was now to behold the countenance of my genial friend Bigot. Clever scoundrel! But not quite clever enough. Why did he bungle his work there at the coal barge? I promised myself to ask him this question and many others when presently he should stand convicted (as must happen) of the murder of Pierre Launay.

But now a sharp cry from the Greek warned me

that something had gone wrong. I turned and beheld X. Stanopoulos staring at the album in real or simulated fury.

"Monsieur, I have been robbed! Look!" He pointed to three blank pages in the album from which, he vowed, the photographs in question had been removed. And further investigation showed that the glass negatives also were missing.

"Wait!" I took the album from him. "What is this?"

X. Stanopoulos threw out his hands and drew up his shoulders in a gesture of angry indifference.

"It ees nothing, Monsieur; a piece of blotting paper."

A piece of blotting paper indeed, nothing more; but, even to my inexperienced eye, it pointed to Emile Bigot as unmistakably as if he had written his name there. For on this oblong white slip was a pencilled scroll of three scalloped wings identical with one that Bigot had absent-mindedly made on a sheet of paper one day while we were waiting for a messenger boy at the Café de la Paix. He had made this scroll over and over again, and I recalled how he had discoursed about the habit men have of scribbling these odd flourishes and figures while they are sitting idly at a desk, waiting in a telephone booth, any time that the fancy takes them to pick up pencil or pen and let it work almost automatically.

" If you should investigate this subject, my boy," he had assured me, " you would find that each man has his own characteristic flourish or paraph. One individual runs to concentric circles, narrowing down to a point like the tail of a cyclone. Another will make a trail of flowing loops like a wall-paper pattern. Another prefers geometrical figures: triangles, squares, pentagons, always the same ones in the same arrangement. And year after year men go on making these peculiar scrawlings in the identical way, so that they could be unmistakably identified, like specimens of penmanship under the scrutiny of a handwriting expert.

" Take these three scalloped wings that I am fond of flourishing forth. I've been making those exact wings, with the very same lines and loops ever since I can remember, and always shall. They constitute my virtual signature. A man could be sent to the guillotine, my dear Esterbrooke, on the evidence of a scrawl like this."

Those were Bigot's own words, and now he had deliberately left this evidence against himself here on the ravished page. Why had he done this? Why had he left that piece of incriminating blotting paper in the album for some one to find it and use it against him?

CHAPTER XIII

DANGER

I was at a loss to know how to proceed. On second thought I saw that I had little enough with which to construct a case against Bigot. Some pencilled flourishes on a piece of blotting paper. Of course he would deny the authorship of these, and if the point were pressed with the testimony of handwriting experts, he would not fail to employ other experts who would testify in his favor. Besides, I had no previous specimen of Bigot's characteristic paraph (those three scalloped wings) to compare with this one in the album. I realized what a great difference there is between being morally sure of a thing and being able to prove it practically.

My first idea was to lead Bigot back (as I easily might) to our discussion of the paraph and its identification value, in the course of which he would naturally furnish me with the desired flourishes. Yes, but would he? Not if his suspicions were aroused, and he remembered that carelessly-left-behind evidence. Nor yet, if he had left this purposely — for his own amusement, as I thought likely. In that event he would make circles for me, triangles, pentagons,

corkscrew curls, anything except the three scalloped wings that I wanted.

I fancied a regular detective would have succeeded here with ease and cleverness, but I did not feel sure of myself, nor even sure that this plan was a good one, since it might reveal to Bigot's shrewd perception that I was on his trail. I hated the thought of that calculating scoundrel laughing at me behind his mask of good fellowship.

So, in my perplexity I waited, did nothing for several days, during which time Fate, in the person of Blanche Launay, intervened and furnished me with an urgent motive for action.

It was on the evening of the third day after my disappointing visit to X. Stanopoulos that there came a friendly and altogether disarming note from Madame Launay saying she had missed me and was very sorry if I had taken offence at any impatient words of hers, begging me to come and take tea with her; which of course I did forthwith.

When I came in her eyes were red from weeping.

"I am very unhappy," she said. "My loss gets harder to bear as the days pass. You mustn't be cross with me. In some ways I feel as if you are my best friend."

"It's good of you to say that. I — I'm sure I'd like to be."

She looked at me appealingly.

"I'm going to give you a proof of my confidence, Alan. You know that man you warned me against? You were right."

"Bigot? What's he been doing?"

"He calls here every day. I don't like him, I don't trust him; but he fascinates me. There's a power about him."

"Of course there is. I knew that all along. Why don't you send him away?"

"I — I think I will," she agreed, but the note of decision was not there. "He talks to me in such an understanding way about Pierre. He has helped me with some designs for a monument. He really has exquisite taste."

"Good Lord!"

The idea of Emile Bigot picking out a monument with tact and tenderness for the man he had almost certainly killed — this was a little too much.

"I'll send him away, Alan, I will," she promised. "He makes me uncomfortable. There's something about him — I don't know what it is."

"He's a scoundrel, a crook," I assured her, and she acknowledged that this was probably true; still I did not feel that she would keep her word and really get rid of Bigot.

As I came away I reflected that here was a woman

who needed guidance and protection, if ever a woman did. And out of gratitude both to her and to her husband, I felt called upon to take some action in her behalf, being sure that she herself would let things drift along dangerously.

But what could I do? Blanche Launay would not accept any warning of mine against Emile Bigot unless I could support it by definite evidence. And I had nothing to offer but a strong presumption. As the senator was fond of pointing out we had no *proof* that Bigot and the missing taxi-cab driver were one and the same person. And even if we had this proof, the priest insisted we could not present it to Madame Launay without betraying the trust our dead friend had reposed in us.

I did not admit this. The priest was mistaken. He had his own standards based on traditions of the confessional; but my standards were different. I was a practical young American who did not propose to let a lady I was loyal to come under the influence of a man who had probably killed her husband. Probably? That was the only difficulty. If I was sure of my ground, I would not hesitate a moment, nor allow any false delicacy to keep me from taking steps to prevent this, even if I had to tell Madame Launay the truth.

In my dilemma I recalled Pierre Launay's last

words authorizing me to use my own judgment if a situation should arise that seemed to me critical. Well, that was exactly what the present situation was — critical. Blanche Launay was in peril, or close to it, with this heartless adventurer hovering around her. I need only explain this situation to Marguerite, who would see the necessity of opening Pierre Launay's letter in order to avert a tragedy, for what could be more tragic than the establishment of sentimental relations between a lovely, confiding woman and the man who had killed her husband?

Having arrived at this conclusion I called up Marguerite and, upon finding her out, left word with Therese that I would drop in about seven that evening and perhaps take a bite of dinner if I should be asked to, which the old servant said would certainly be the case. Also, Therese would please tell her mistress that I had an important matter to lay before her.

Alas! this was not the first time I was made to realize that newspaper reporters are not masters of their own time, for having stopped at the office to report, I was sent off post-haste for an interview with a self-satisfied British ex-Cabinet Minister, who wore an arrogant monocle and who explained all the mistakes that other Cabinet Ministers had made and told my readers exactly where the salvation of Europe

lay, to the extent of a column and a half that was cabled to the uttermost parts of the earth and brought me commendation. How I did jolly along that poor worm of a statesman who thought all the time he was overwhelming me with his importance.

Consequently it was nearly eleven o'clock when I kept my appointment.

"I'm nearly starved, dear girl," I told Marguerite when she received me a little pettishly. "Haven't had a blessed thing to eat since one o'clock." At which her dear heart relented, and she called Thérèse, who brought in some chicken salad and a bottle of red wine, and we enjoyed these along with cigarettes. Then Marguerite curled up in a corner of the divan with her arms over her head and told me to go ahead with my important matter; she was listening.

"I really have something to say that's quite urgent, Margie, but you look so very pretty there that — if you don't mind, I'll mention another little thing first. You see — I'm getting nearly twice as much now as I had before I went to London. It seems they're pleased with me — for some strange reason."

"Of course they are — who wouldn't be?" Her eyes sparkled.

I took her hand and looked hard into her lovely face.

"If *you* are, that's about all I ask." Then I burst out abruptly: "You know what I want to say, Margie. I love you. I've never loved any other girl, and never will. I want to make up to you for what I've made you suffer. I want you to be my wife, Margie."

I can see her eyes now as they filled with tears. "Your wife!" she murmured.

"We can be married quietly and — they'll give me a little vacation. I'll take you into Normandy for a couple of weeks and we'll just fool around, look at the flowers, the gardens. . . ."

Marguerite sighed.

"Normandy! It would be too wonderful; but — no!"

"But — yes," I tried to be masterful.

She answered very tenderly:

"*Mon chéri, écoute!* We musn't be afraid to look at the truth. You know I love you. That's the terrible part of it — we love each other, but we should be unhappy. You would be first, then I should be because you were. Don't you see?"

"I'd be the happiest man in Paris," I told her.

She shook her head.

"The unhappiest. We'd have endless arguments, quarrels. You see, I haven't changed my ideas."

"Oh! come, don't let's have any more of that

advanced woman pose. I understand this bluff you've been putting up, Margie. I know all about you. You are not one of these excessively modern young women full of wild ideas. Not a bit of it. You are a dear, sweet little girl, who has had some hard luck, most of which is my fault, and who needs to be loved a whole lot."

There was a quiver in Marguerite's voice as she said: "It's true I — I've had hard luck ——"

"And I'm to blame for it, entirely to blame. If I hadn't been a fool — you see, I meant well, I thought it was my duty to save you from yourself, but ——"

"You were sincere, Alan. You did what you thought right. You couldn't have done what you thought was wrong. Don't you see? It isn't anybody's fault. Or perhaps it's my fault. Still, I can't help my ideas ——"

She hesitated.

"You don't mean that you still believe in that rotten book?" My face must have hardened, for her eyes flashed back at me and her chin came up stubbornly.

"It's a great book. Why shouldn't women have their liberty? There's no reason but custom."

"Good Lord!"

"You see? You *would* be unhappy. I couldn't prevent it. I must be honest, dear. Forgive me."

At this I assumed my dignified manner, for my feelings were hurt. I really did not see why Marguerite should make all these difficulties when I had shown myself so reasonable. I tried to go on with the talk, but did not make a success of it, and a little later I picked up my hat and cane, as if to depart.

Marguerite watched me with mingled feelings of amusement and vexation; then, as her mothering spirit gained the ascendant, she said good-naturedly:

"Silly boy! Are you going without even telling me the important thing you came for? Come back. Take off your things. Sit down and be sensible."

But I would not unbend, or rather I could not. My miserable Puritan ancestry had me in its grip for the moment.

"I did have something important to say, but — I don't suppose there's much use ——"

Marguerite burst out laughing. I suppose I did present a ridiculous appearance standing there with my overcoat collar turned up and my feeble effort at dignity.

"Please tell me."

"Well," I said with an effort, "I wanted to speak of Emile Bigot ——"

"I wish you would, *chéri,* I've seen so little of you lately — since you've been making that investigation. Go on, tell me about Bigot."

"He says he knows you or knew your father — was mixed up with your family in some way. Is that true?"

"How extraordinary! I never heard of M. Bigot until you told me he had inherited this money."

"That's what I thought. He's a most unconscionable liar!"

"Really?" This seemed to amuse her. "Tell me more about him. You know I love liars."

"If I started on that subject, I'd never get through. The point is Bigot has been getting a horribly bad influence over Madame Launay. She believes in him; in fact she's fascinated by him. I'm afraid she is in serious danger, and — er — I want to save her if I can."

Marguerite bit her lip, straightened up, and became as cold as ice.

"That seems to be your favorite rôle, saving women from danger. What is the particular danger that threatens Madame Launay?"

"I told you, it's this man Bigot. He won't leave her alone. And she won't believe me when I tell her he's a scoundrel. I have an idea that Pierre Launay's letter will prove this. So I thought perhaps — under the circumstances ——" I found myself floundering about awkwardly. "I mean that we really ought to do all we can to save Pierre Launay's widow and — er ——"

"I see. You want me to open his letter."

"It would be a fine action. Would you mind?"

"Opening Pierre Launay's letter before the time? Against his wish? I certainly would mind. I'm surprised at you far asking me to do this. Besides, I — I'm not interested in Madame Launay."

CHAPTER XIV

BIGOT'S ASTONISHING STATEMENT

I COULD not understand Marguerite's unwillingness to help a sister woman in such peril, and puzzled over this for days. It was not like Marguerite, whose nature was generous and sympathetic. What could be the explanation? Did she really feel herself bound to observe Pierre Launay's wish? Could she not see that Launay himself would be the first one to approve of her opening this envelope if he knew the circumstances? Besides, what difference could a few months make? I was disappointed in my sweetheart. Also, I was cut to the heart by her rejection of my offer of marriage. Marguerite had been more than nice to me, had said she loved me, and acted as if this were true; yet she refused to be my wife. Why?

My work suffered during days that followed, for I was perplexed, irritable, bitter at the thought that I had lost my sweetheart, yet too proud to ask her to change her mind. There was a miserable fortnight when I did not see Marguerite at all, nor even speak to her over the telephone.

Then suddenly there came a new development that changed the whole complexion of affairs.

Blanche Launay sent for me in urgent haste — a telephone call that I did not get, a *petit bleu* that arrived too late, finally a messenger boy who found me at the newspaper office. It was of extreme importance, he said, that I should go to Madame Launay at once.

I found the lady in great agitation, almost hysterical, and no wonder, for things had hapened that might well break the nerve of any woman. There was, first and last, the increasing importunity of Bigot. He was in evidence constantly, and back of his smiling insistence was a vague menace, as if he felt himself master of the situation.

"I'm afraid of him, horribly afraid," she confessed. "But I haven't the strength to get rid of him. I've told him he must not come back, but he comes. And I see him. I see him every day."

In her tone I caught a sense of despairing inevitableness that recalled Pierre Launay's feeling toward that sombre bandit whom he had encountered so fatalistically in the Place de la Concorde, and whom he continued to meet day after day.

"But why do you see him?" I questioned.

"I don't know. I can't explain it. He has a power over me. At first there was a sort of fascination, but now — I loathe him."

"And yet you receive him?"

"Yes. I can't help it. He has this power. It's unendurable. There are no bounds to his impudence. He seems to think he owns me. He — he wants me to marry him."

"Good God!" I burst out.

"You see you must help me, Alan."

I looked at her in amazement. What could be the secret of Bigot's infernal influence over women? This bounder; fat, bald, not overclean! And here was a lady of culture and intelligence who found him irresistible. A man she detested, a liar, a scoundrel; yet she was afraid to shut her door in his face. Why? It reminded one of that slimy Russian monk who enchained an Empress.

"You don't think it's anything like hypnotism, do you?" I suggested.

"I don't know what it is. He seems to draw me to him. When the maid comes to say he is there, I tell her to show him in, although I don't mean to."

"What do you talk about?"

"Everything. He does most of the talking. I listen — and hate him. He's very clever — amusing. Sometimes I think he is the most delightful man I ever met. But all the time I know he's a horrible creature. You were quite right. Alan, do you think you can do anything? I — I know I'm in great danger."

"Why — er — I believe there's something I can do," I said stumblingly; but she must have sensed the truth, that I was far from convinced of my ability to protect her against her own weakness, for she suddenly broke down entirely and wept, while I tried vainly to soothe her.

"Please don't; it's going to be all right. I'll think of something, I'm sure I will," I told her.

This availed little, however, against the lady's distress, which grew, as her tears began to flow, like a pent-up dam that bursts its barriers, and presently she was sobbing in a wild way, painful to witness, astonishing to me, for I could not imagine why Madame Launay should surrender to such excessive agitation.

At last she grew calm, and at my earnest solicitation gave me a more adequate explanation of her despair, telling me astonishing things that she had previously withheld. I don't know why it is, but women seem to regard me as a suitable recipient of their intimate confidences.

What Madame Launay now revealed would be enough, I should say, to make her unhappy husband arise in his shroud from that grave in the Père Lachaise cemetery where devoted friends had laid him, and where I myself, on my return from London, had deposited an affectionate wreath. Or at least to make

him turn over with an impotent gnashing of teeth. Her narrative covered a month's events dating from that unfortunate day when I brought Bigot to meet her.

Blanche Launay had assured me that she hated Bigot; but it was soon apparent, as she went into details, that hers was the kind of hate that is closely akin to love. This feeling had grown out of her sympathy for Bigot in the frightful wrong he had suffered at Pierre Launay's hands, a wrong the nature of which she still refused to reveal, except to insist that it had spoiled the man's whole life. Gradually, as she thought about this, she had come to admire Bigot for his fortitude during all those years of poverty, exile, disgrace, imprisonment that had resulted. In vain I objected that these ills existed only in Bigot's infernal imagination; Blanche Launay remained unshaken in her conviction that he was the victim of an irreparable wrong. Had not her husband declared this with his last words?

As the days passed Bigot's attraction for her had grown with amazing swiftness. He was in her thoughts constantly. He understood her as no one ever had. He was ceaseless in little attentions, acts of thoughtfulness. Often he touched her by his humility, as when he explained that he had never rebelled against his hard and lonely fate because he

deserved punishment for sins of his own. He said he would never have emerged from the shadows, nor sought to leave the humble station he was occupying in a distant land (Madame Launay had a feeling this was Russia, although Bigot never said so) had not Pierre Launay's will summoned him. He could talk like an angel on occasions.

One day Blanche Launay made the astounding discovery that she was beginning to care for this ne'er-do-well, this waster of precious talents, this wanderer over the earth. She found herself looking forward to his calls, missing him in his absence, holding him constantly in her thoughts, dreaming of him. . . .

That was the first stage — it lasted eight or nine days — and was followed by an intenser period when his magnetic hold had grown into an established ascendency, and when she almost admitted to herself that she loved Bigot. Almost, but not quite. She would fain have loved him, but feared to; and then the ultimate truth was forced upon her that she did love him. There was no use arguing about this, or trying to hide the fact from herself; it was too late; she loved him. Right or wrong, she loved him. Sinner or saint, she loved him.

Then came the second stage when Madame Launay ceased all self-deception, and gave free rein

to her infatuation, allowing the man to see, in every reasonably modest way, that his attentions were not unwelcome, but the contrary. And she convinced herself that this was right. Why should she not love Bigot? Why should she not do her part in making amends for those cruel and unmerited sufferings? Perhaps this would be the first great joy that had ever come into his lonely, broken life. Perhaps this was the first time Bigot had ever in the finest and truest way loved a woman. How wonderful it would be.

And, finally, the third and tragic period began when, after allowing her passion for Bigot to grow unrestrained, she began to worry lest he entertained no similar feeling for her. True, he called constantly, was abundant in every conceivable attention, and again and again had allowed her to read in his intense eyes and subtly caressing manner the unspoken message of his love; but for some unaccountable reason he failed to utter the essential avowal, in spite of languishing encouragement. It seemed to Blanche Launay that at each visit Bigot *almost* declared himself; but somehow he never quite did. He always managed on his departure to leave the situation between them still unsettled.

At last came the fateful day — two days before this — when Bigot had arrived, heralded, as usual,

by flowers — a huge box of pink roses — and had shown himself at his very best, modest, considerate, delightfully entertaining. Blanche Launay *knew* he loved her — a child could see it, and she felt that he was now about to speak. He *must* see her readiness, her eagerness for the awaited words, those dear old words — if not, what were a woman's smiles and allurements for?

Bigot was a little over-dressed, according to his habit, with a gardenia in his coat; and there hung about him a faint, rather odd and pleasant perfume.

"Dear lady," he began finally, after the inevitable preliminaries that accompany even the tensest, the tenderest situation, "it grieves me to tell you that I must leave this lovely city, *ville lumiere,* which has been rendered brighter and more joyful to me by your gracious presence."

"You are — going away?" she faltered.

He bowed ceremoniously.

"On a long journey, Madame."

Blanche Launay's heart was chilled as a swift stab of memory brought back those same words, spoken by Pierre Launay on that dreadful night. A long journey!

"But — why?"

"Because I am so happy that — either I must be *more* happy or — lose everything."

He held her in silent, impassioned appeal. She did not pretend to misunderstand.

"Are you referring to — me?"

"Yes," he said.

"Perhaps it will not be necessary for you to go away," she answered gently.

"It is necessary, a hundred times more necessary now that you have said what you have. Oh, my friend! It tears my heart to tell you this, but the truth is I, unworthy man, have dared to dream of something so splendid, so beautiful, so far above me and removed from me ——"

"No," she whispered, her eyes yearning upon him.

"I, a man without culture, social position — —"

"A man with individuality, charm — a wonderful mind ——"

"I, who have lived through mad, reckless years, committed crimes, suffered ignominies. . . ."

His eyes seemed to widen, to drift away from her. His fingers began to twitch, his face to redden.

"I will make up for those years to you," she breathed.

He laid his coarse, thick-fingered hand on hers, patting it affectionately with little pats; then he muttered, as to himself; "It would have been so much better if he had never called me out of the shadows."

"No," she disagreed softly, whereupon Bigot seemed to undergo a transformation, his coarseness and commonness disappeared, and there spread over his countenance a dignity, a glory as if some base film that hid the beauty of his soul had been lifted. And now, as at last he spoke the longed-for words, it seemed to Blanche Launay as if a superior being, some pure creature from the effulgent light were addressing her:

"I love you so much, sweet lady — *you,* Blanche, the white, stainless one — I love you so much that I would gladly die for you, gladly bear any pain or shame for you, gladly give everything I have in the world for you, but —— Ah, *malheur!*" he broke off suddenly, and now his face was purplish, his fingers were opening and shutting with quick little jerks. But Blanche Launay did not observe this, being quite lifted out of herself by the strength of her emotions.

"I love you," she murmured.

Bigot sat motionless, staring away into space.

"I don't care who you are or what you have done; I love you," she repeated, and her eyes burned on him.

Bigot never moved.

"Listen!" she went on ecstatically. "If you had all your troubles to bear again — exile, poverty, disgrace, prison — I would bear them with you."

Still she waited; still Bigot made no response; and now Blanche Launay noticed a slight twitching on the left side of his face.

"Madame," he said at last, withdrawing himself as by an effort from his abstraction, "you have a noble heart. If my whole unworthy life has brought me only this moment, I am satisfied. But your generosity can avail nothing. I must leave you. I have done wrong to aspire so high. There is an unsurmountable barrier between us."

"No barrier can keep us apart," she cried impetuously. "I care nothing for the world's opinion, nothing for sins, disgraces, perils ——"

Suddenly she stopped as she saw Bigot's face, and she felt the cold clutch of fear.

"There is one thing that can keep us — apart." He spoke thickly with an effort, and his left cheek was twitching faster.

"You are not — married?"

Blanche Launay sighed in relief as he shook his head, then she noticed the deepening purple of his face, the queer stare of his eyes.

"It isn't that. I — I killed your husband. Ah! Some water — water — quick!"

Bigot gasped the words and tore at his shirt-collar, as if he were unable to breathe. His eyes rolled wildly. His lips were a greenish white, flecked with

foam. With a hoarse scream as of terror he sprawled back in his chair and his body began to jerk spasmodically.

This astounding *dénouement* brought its own disappointment, for Blanche Launay assured me she had been unable to obtain further information from Bigot, not one word toward the clearing up of a hundred details in the Launay mystery that I would have wished to have explained. She had sent hastily for a doctor who, after ministering to the stricken man, had accompanied Bigot back to his hotel, assuring Madame Launay that the trouble would not be serious, the patient would probably be all right the next day.

And now came what was to me the most extraordinary feature of the lady's statement, that, although she had lain awake most of the night thinking over Bigot's confession, trying to decide what she ought to do about it, she had failed to reach the logical conclusion that the widow of a slain man might be supposed to reach; namely, that she would act promptly for the punishment of the murderer. This, Blanche Launay assured me, she found herself unable to do, finding a shield to her evasive reluctance in the warning Pierre Launay had given her not to take any steps against the criminal. The woman knew in her heart that she did not wish to take such steps, and she hated herself for this feeling. Theoretically she

hated Emile Bigot, but in the depths of her soul she knew she did not hate him; she rather made excuses for him; saw extenuating circumstances for him. It was horrible, revolting to realize that she was capable of such disloyalty; yet so it was.

Worse than this, Blanche Launay had a frightened realization that, even now, she could not bring herself to close her door against Bigot. Hating him or not, loathing him or not, she would still receive him, if he sought her out. She was not strong enough to resist this man, although she knew out of his own mouth that he had slain her husband. Was there ever such ghastly weakness!

While she thus distressfully admitted, or half admitted, that she would see Bigot, if he called, Madame Launay pretended valiantly to herself all through the next morning, and part of the afternoon, that she would not see him. She gave the maid positive orders to that effect and even planned to be out at the tea-hour so as to protect her resolution; but found herself wavering as the danger-time approached, and when the bell rang about four it was Madame Launay herself who opened the door and received Pierre Launay's assassin. White-faced, white-lipped, piteous to behold, she received him.

Bigot appeared, dapper and debonair, in a smart spring suit, with his habitual gardenia, his little

flexible silver-headed malacca stick. She noticed that he had a new scarf pin, a large black pearl in a circlet of small diamonds, stuck in a purple cravat from Charvet's. His manner was affable, unconcerned, as he greeted the lady pleasantly, slipping off his gloves.

In dumb amazement, in horror, the outraged wife stared at him. What kind of a soulless, heartless creature must he be to chatter along idly about banalities of Parisian life — an amusing story he had heard at the Café de Paris, a bit of gossip from the Theatre Français — knowing that she knew all about his foul and treacherous guilt?

"What is it, dear friend?" he asked with solicitous gallantry. "You seem strange to me. Are you ill? Didn't you sleep well?"

Blanche Launay could not speak; but her eyes were on him in damning accusation. What stupendous effrontery!

"Don't you *know?*"

"Why — er ——" Bigot paused as he drew a cigarette from a thin gold case and deliberately lighted it. "Are you by any chance referring to something that may have happened while I was here yesterday afternoon?" He spoke with a detached and intelligent directness, as if he were considering some matter that had only the slightest personal interest for him.

"Yes, I am." Her voice tingled with denunciation.

Then Bigot said carelessly: "I'm extremely sorry, gracious lady, but if you have in mind some — er — incident at the very end of my visit — something I may have said — is it so?"

"Yes."

"Then allow me to inform you that I was ill — a kind of sickness that I am unfortunately subject to. I have suffered from it twice in my life — once in Buenos Aires, once in Pekin, and — the fact is I do not remember what I said."

"You said you killed my husband."

Bigot stared, then laughed, then broke into peals of harsh merriment.

"Incredible! Absurd!"

Nor could Blanche Launay make him take the matter seriously. He simply repeated that he was ill and no more responsible for any such preposterous statement than he would have been responsible for foolish mutterings in his sleep. As to the fact itself, he absolutely and positively denied it.

"Whatever else you may think of me, *chère amie,*" he smiled politely, "I hope you give me credit for being not quite a fool."

With this he had taken his departure, saying he would call again the next day, when he hoped to find his charming but too susceptible friend quite re-

covered from this unfortunate agitation.

" The big fat brute, I'd like to break his neck! " I exploded.

" But what am I going to do, Alan? Unless you can help me, I am lost. It's like being possessed by an evil spirit. Merciful Mother! " she wrung her hands despairingly.

" See here, Madame," I made bold to say, " there's no reason why you should get so worked up over this. I don't see why you can't perfectly well deal with this man yourself —— "

" I can't, I'm helpless, I'm in his power," she wailed; whereupon, knowing the signs, I yielded.

" All right, then, I — I'll do something to settle this. I'll deal with Bigot myself."

God knows why I undertook such a responsibility, but I did. I suppose it was some prompting of the chivalrous feeling that is in every young fellow for a beautiful woman in desperate need.

" *Sans faute?* " she begged.

" *Sans faute,*" I promised.

CHAPTER XV

THERESE INTERVENES

THE next day I strolled about miserably for hours in one of those let-down periods that come with the reaction from a great excitement. I had been deeply stirred by Blanche Launay's recital, quite sincere in my promise to save her from this danger; but now with the disillusionment that a dreary, drizzly morning brings (especially after a sleepless night) I cursed myself as a presumptuous young fool for meddling in this affair that did not concern me. Who was I to be saving foolish women from sentimental perils? And how was I to do it, I, who was unable to solve my own much easier heart-problems? Let Madame Launay take care of herself.

In my distress of mind I turned into the Madeleine church, thinking to find wisdom and comfort in the old way. I was gazing sadly at the great carved altar when I became vaguely aware of a sweet-faced elderly woman who was praying devoutly near me, and who now turned her head in my direction; but I gave no heed to her, being absorbed in my own troubles. Where could I find some easement for my heart's pain? What should I do about Marguerite? Must I

take her refusal to marry me as final, or should I go back more determinedly than ever and try to win her? Alas! Indecision has always been my weakness, and always will be, I fear. I have the unfortunate faculty of seeing both sides of every question.

And now some devil of jealousy whispered to me that perhaps Marguerite had refused me because she preferred the free life of a theatrical artist. Perhaps I *should* be unhappy, as she herself had warned me, with a girl of her extreme views, one who approved of a book like *La Louve!* What would my excellent Presbyterian relatives in Connecticut think if I brought such a wife home to them?

Shame on me for these waverings!

Just then a rustle of skirts caught my ear, and, turning, I saw that my neighbor had arisen from her knees and was looking fixedly at me, as if she knew me; then in the dim light I recognized Therese, my darling's faithful companion.

"How extraordinary that we should meet here!" I said as we descended the broad stone steps.

Her motherly eyes rested on me and seemed to fathom my thoughts. I felt there was something she wanted to tell me; so I walked along beside her, down the Rue Royale toward the Champs Elysées, recalling that once before we had gone this way together.

"Suppose we sit over here?" I suggested as we approached the obelisk and the fountains. "You can tell me — about things."

"Oh, Monsieur, *she* has missed you so much all these days," my companion sighed, when we had settled ourselves in two of those amusing little iron chairs with springy seats that one finds in the Tuileries gardens. "If you knew how often she speaks of you."

"She does — really?"

"I can't tell you how fine, how brave, how splendid Mademoiselle Marguerite has been," Therese went on eagerly.

"But ——"

"I know what you would say, Monsieur; you are afraid she may have done wayward things since that day when — when ——"

"When she left me," I supplied. "Don't think I'm blaming Marguerite. I'm not. Whatever she has done is my fault. I've thought it all out, and that's clear in my mind. I love her in spite of everything. I told her so. I asked her to marry me, but — she refused me."

Never shall I forget how Therese looked at me out of her tired, honest eyes, eyes that filled slowly with tears as I said this. If ever a woman's glance carried a benediction, it was this one. She caught my hand in hers and held it a moment.

" God bless you and the Holy Mother guard you, Monsieur, for those words. It's a beautiful thing when a man is loyal like that to a girl. And you can believe me who have taken care of Mademoiselle ever since she was a baby that, no matter what she says, she has never been anything but pure and good."

I stared at Therese, uncomprehending.

" No matter what she says? You mean she might — pretend —— ? "

" *Oui,* Monsieur. It's very strange. Please be patient and I will try to explain."

Her eyes wandered slowly along the lines of newly budding *marroiners,* then she began to speak, and for nearly an hour I listened while this devoted old servant in her simple but convincing way told me Marguerite's story, the most perplexing record of a woman's inconsistency that I ever listened to. I shall never pass through these lovely gardens without recalling that memorable hour.

The cause of all the trouble, Therese said, was a stubborn pride, a fierce, unsurrendering pride that Marguerite had inherited from her father, a man of the old Spartan type, high-backed, uncompromising, who could see things in only one way, that being his way. Victor Mayol, I gathered, was one who could never forsake a friend, nor forgive an enemy. He

would die sooner than deviate from his rigid principles and standards. And yet he was generous to a fault, loyal with all the strength of his soul.

" I suppose he took it very hard when Marguerite went away from home? " I said.

" It nearly killed him, Monsieur. He just mourned and brooded."

Brooded? I shivered as an unbidden thought forced itself upon me.

And the old nurse continued, going back to that day when my sweetheart had left me with angry words.

" At first we took a room in a little hotel near the Champ de Mars, and every morning Mademoiselle would go out to look for work, to seek some position — piano lessons, anything — and every night she came back — so tired, discouraged. Those were hard weeks. We had little money, Monsieur."

" Poor child! "

" One day she answered an advertisement for a stewardess on a steamship running between Liverpool and Quebec. They wanted some one who knew French, for there were French Canadians among the passengers, and of course Mademoiselle was just the person. They offered good wages and were anxious to have her, but she would not leave me behind, the

dear child! and finally they engaged me as a children's nurse in the play-room; and so we went to sea."

"Really?"

"*Oui,* Monsieur. And it was hard work. The first voyage Mademoiselle was so ill, pitifully ill; but she never complained, she did her work, even when they put her in the steerage, where most of the French Canadians were. And that turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for — you know what a lovely voice she has?"

"Indeed, I do."

"Well, it was her voice that brought us good luck. There was a little melodeon that they used to put on deck on pleasant days and Mademoiselle would sing for the steerage people. They all loved her, and on Sundays they would sing revival hymns: 'Throw out the Life-line,' 'Hold the Fort.' It was beautiful. The first cabin passengers used to crowd along the rail to listen. And when they had concerts in the great blue-and-gilt saloon they would ask Mademoiselle to sing her little French songs. You should have heard them applaud.

"That's how she got her chance to sing in vaudeville, for a theatrical manager heard Mademoiselle at one of these concerts and he couldn't praise her enough. He said she had the making of another

Yvette Guilbert, *oui,* Monsieur, and offered her an engagement. Now you understand how she happens to be singing at the '*Folies Dramatiques.*' It's not a very nice place, Monsieur, but every night I've been with my sweet child in her dressing-room."

"Wonderful!" I murmured. "It's the pluckiest thing I ever heard of. And yet she hides all this. I can't understand it."

Therese wiped her faithful old eyes.

"It's her pride, Monsieur. She has these ideas about her liberty. Perhaps she thought she would use it, as some do, but — she couldn't. And now — there's something else."

Therese sighed again.

"What is it? Don't tell me she's ill?"

"She's not exactly ill, but she isn't strong, *pauvre chéri.* I hear that little cough at night. I tell Mademoiselle she is foolish to go out in this bad weather, but she goes out every day. She says she must find work."

"Work? But she has work. Is there any trouble at the theater?"

The old servant hesitated, saying Mademoiselle would not like it if she told me. After some urging, however, Therese confided in me that her mistress had been asked to sing in a new revue; but Marguerite was afraid I would be displeased because most

of the women were rather scantily, although artistically, clad. So she had refused an offer of 1,200 francs a week and was going back to piano lessons.

" Piano lessons? But that's horrible drudgery. It seems to me I'd rather die than give piano lessons."

Therese's face brightened.

" That's what I say to Mademoiselle, but she wants to do it."

" And you mean to tell me she's turning down this offer because she's afraid I may not like it? "

" *Oui,* Monsieur."

" *Nom d'un chien,*" I burst out in the exuberance of my joy. I felt like kissing those withered cheeks in my gratitude. " But — why did she refuse me? Why won't she marry me? "

Therese smiled indulgently and I caught in her eyes a message of solace and hope, a motherly message.

" She *will* marry you, Monsieur, if you ask her again. Her feelings were hurt, she was — jealous."

Jealous! In a flash I saw it all. My darling was jealous of Blanche Launay. Heavenly joys! My poor, proud, stubborn, darling! *Jealous!*

" Holy snakes! This settles it. *She cares!* Come on! And remember, you fine woman, you touch half my salary-cheque this week. Yes, you do. Come."

I caught Therese's arm and a minute later we were

off for the Rue de Ponthieu as fast as a black and yellow taxi-cab with a benevolent-looking chauffeur could get us there.

I need not describe what happened when I met my darling (caught her in my arms, blushing, radiant), except to record that my impetuosity swept aside all obstacles. There was no more bluffing, no more airy badinage. Marguerite cried and said she loved me and had been terribly unhappy. And I kissed her and comforted her and said I loved her and always would. I *wanted* her to accept that fine offer at the theater and never to dream of giving piano lessons. *Quel horreur!* Whereupon she said I was the most wonderful, the most reasonable, the most understanding man in the world, and she adored me. Also she acknowledged through her tears that she *had* been jealous of Blanche Launay, although this was not the only reason why she didn't wish to open Pierre Launay's letter.

"It goes against my conscience, Alan, to disobey his command. A voice from the grave! I couldn't, dear. Perhaps it's because I've been so ill myself. I'm not very strong now. Sometimes I think ——"

"No, no!" I interrupted. "You mustn't have sad thoughts. You're going to live to be a nice little old lady in a lace cap, with a lot of grandchildren"

"*Grand bébé!*" She laughed.

"We'll be married in June — only a few months to wait."

At this her face clouded and she shook her head with one of those wistful smiles that was half a sob.

"We'll never be married, dear — not because I don't want to be, but ——"

"About the ninth of June — nine is my lucky number. We'll be married in Normandie, among the flowers and gardens. Wouldn't you like that, Margie?"

She lifted her blessed black-grey eyes and I drank in her fair young beauty.

"I'd love the flowers and gardens," she answered pensively, "but ——" Then I stilled her adorable lips in the most effective and satisfactory way that has yet been devised.

All this being settled to my satisfaction and the jealousy question being disposed of, we came to the immediate business before the meeting.

"I've got something awfully important to tell you, Margie. It will make you understand things better, you'll see why we just *can't* let Madame Launay fall into the clutches of Emile Bigot. He has a sinister influence over her. She distrusts him, hates him, but — he's capable of *making* her marry him."

Marguerite frowned.

"Well, what of it?"

"There's *this* of it, I'm not supposed to tell anyone — only the executors know it — but you're my little partner and you're going to be my wife, so you've got to be *au courant* with everything so as to help me. Now listen! Get ready for a shock. Some of us believe that Bigot killed Pierre Launay."

My sweetheart's eyes widened.

"How horrible!"

"Yes, it is; it's not only horrible to think of, but it's frightfully hard to prove. Just the same, we're going to prove it, you and I together."

With this I proceeded to give my reasons for this suspicion, presenting the case so strongly that Marguerite was presently convinced, or nearly so.

"And you think the absolute proof that Bigot did this is in that envelope?"

"I'm sure it is. Still, as long as you feel about it the way you do ——"

"I do, Alan. I can't help it. It's like a sacred trust."

"All right. There are more ways than one of skinning a cat. We'll prove that Bigot is guilty, anyhow — without opening that letter."

"How can you?"

"By using our brains — under proper stimulation. What I need is the right kind of a collaborator. There! Tilt up your blessed lips a little more — like that. Good! Now turn on the inspiration."

An hour later, as I said au revoir to Marguerite I saw by her flushed cheeks and over-brilliant eyes that the strain of all this had told upon her, and I bade her good night tenderly.

"You'll come to-morrow evening, Alan?" she asked.

"*Every* evening," I rejoined; then I strolled home in a blaze of sunshine (although there was no change in the atmospheric drizzle), with bands playing all about me and nightingales singing . . . strolled home by a round-about way, across the Pont de l'Alma, and on slowly along dark, narrow streets that lie to the south of the river, dark, narrow streets that were now brilliant and glorious, paved with gold . . . because I was thinking of my darling.

CHAPTER XV

MASKS

THE question was, could we convict Emile Bigot by our own wits without breaking the seals of that forbidden envelope? This was the subject of discussion that occupied Marguerite and myself for hours during the days that followed.

We had no experience in criminal matters, but we had two points of superiority over the Paris police; first, we were morally certain that Bigot was guilty, and, second, we were able to approach Bigot in a natural and friendly way (through my amiable relations) without arousing his suspicions. Bigot really seemed to like me and was always giving me invitations to go off with him on gay parties in Montmartre that he loved to organize. He was a gorgeous spender, a great eater, and champagne flowed in his trail like a river. Yet he always managed to keep his head. He was capable of the maddest extravagance, but you felt that he knew all the time exactly what he was doing. If he gave a pretty flower-girl a thousand-franc note with a lordly gesture (which I have seen him do), he did this largely for effect, to *épater* the band of astounded companions, men and women, who

would talk of his lavishness for weeks. He was the vainest man in the world; nevertheless, the odiousness of this was redeemed by his sense of humor. He knew he was vain. On the whole, I rather liked Bigot; I always have had a weakness for sinners.

Marguerite and I studied the evidence of the coroner's inquest and the police investigation, and discovered that very late on the night of the crime (about three in the morning) a river-watchman had seen a suspicious individual coming up the slanting roadway from the point where the taxi-cab was engulfed in the Seine. This individual was probably the guilty driver, Jean Pitou, the man who had lived in the Rue Orfila and had now transformed himself into Emile Bigot. If we could only in some way let this watchman have a good look at Bigot, that point might be established. And, of course, the same was true of the concierge in the Rue Orfila, who might remember his lodger.

"But Bigot has changed his appearance since then," Marguerite pointed out.

"Of course he has; he wore a short beard in the Rue Orfila, a beard streaked with grey, and he cut that off; but he hasn't cut off his little blond mustache. And he hasn't changed his eyes or his voice."

"He *might* change his voice."

"Ye-es, but that isn't easy."

" Besides, you're forgetting the false nose with the scar on it."

" The mask that he wore? I know. I've thought about that. We've got to find some way to make Bigot put on that mask, haven't we? "

Marguerite pursed up her pretty brows.

" And even if we manage that, there is still the question where they're going to meet. We've got to give these two men time to study Bigot without arousing his suspicion."

As we turned this over in our minds, a dozen ways suggested themselves for this identification. I could invite Bigot to the theater, for instance, and put him in the front of a box while the concierge and night-watchman studied his face from orchestra seats. The objection to this plan was that Bigot would be sure to see these two individuals staring at him, and, as he must remember them (assuming him to be guilty), this would put him on his guard.

The same difficulty presented itself if we arranged a meeting in a café or a restaurant or on a railway train. In all such casual encounters, Bigot would not only be seen, but he would see, and (being clever) would not fail to understand what was happening, and this would spoil everything. Obviously, we must hit upon some arrangement that would permit of his being seen without arousing suspicion.

It was Marguerite who found the solution. Why not invite Emile Bigot, she suggested, to one of the gay masked balls that are being constantly given in Paris, and have the night-watchman and the concierge there in dominos and masks? And let Bigot wear his false nose?

"By George, you've got it; you're a wonder, Margie!" I approved, "but — can I get Bigot to do it?"

"Wear the mask?"

"Yes. He won't be such a fool, will he?"

My sweetheart studied over this.

"Perhaps he will. He may think it's the best way to throw you off the track by a *coup d'audace* — if he's as clever as you say."

"He's clever all right. Anyway, there's no harm trying it. By the way, would there be any use including your friend Jacques Vanneau in this little surprise party?" I really said this to test Marguerite's quickness of wit; nor did she disappoint me.

"What for?" she answered. "The man *he* saw, the one in the workman's blouse at Notre-Dame, couldn't possibly have been Bigot."

"Why not?"

"Because of the scarred finger."

"Excellently argued," I laughed. "Well, we'll consider that settled."

I busied myself accordingly with this plan, first seeking out the two witnesses who might be able to identify our bald-headed friend. The concierge proved to be a hungry-looking, hollow-cheeked individual named Schillio, very much under the domination of his wife, a hard-visaged lady who kept him eternally at work polishing the stairs. Schillio remembered Jean Pitou distinctly and was sure he could identify him, even without his beard. And the night-watchman was equally positive. His name was P. Theron, and he raised canary birds, he informed me, for the bird-market near the Prefecture de Police. These two were overjoyed when I presented them with tickets, at fifty francs each, with fancy costumes for a masked ball to be given the following Saturday at the Grand Opera House under the high auspices of the President of the Republique. And they swore to keep on their masks under all circumstances, under pain of forfeiting the hundred francs each that I had promised them for their trouble.

As to Emile Bigot, I had no difficulty in persuading him to accept my invitation, since it was announced that the most beautiful women in Paris were to be present *en masse* on this brilliant occasion. He would have attended anyway. And when I suggested that we go disguised as mutilated soldiers, and told him I had ordered two suitable masks, he made no

objection except that he feared this might injure his chances with the ladies.

"However," he laughed, "we can take them off later in the night."

I was elated by this easy success, and regretted only that I could find no plausible reason for asking Bigot to wear a false beard.

"It's just as well, anyway," said Marguerite. "The man who came up from the river had no beard — only a mustache. The night-watchman was positive about that."

"You're right. I had forgotten. A yellowish mustache — like Bigot's." I frowned as a new and unfavorable consideration struck me. "Come to think of it, I don't quite see how the man who came up from the river *can* be Bigot, for, according to my theory, Bigot didn't come up at all — he hid in the coal-barge. Furthermore, this fellow ought to have been wet — soaked through — whereas he was dry, apparently."

"Perhaps he was wet underneath — only his overcoat was dry."

"By gracious, you've got it! I see it all now! The chauffeur stripped off his overcoat before he jumped and threw it on the bank — perhaps his cap too — then when he swam ashore he put the overcoat on again. When he ran into the night-watchman he de-

cided it was too risky to walk through Paris that way with water slopping down over his boots, so he went back and hid in the coal-barge — see? "

We agreed that this was a reasonable enough assumption, and let it go at that.

On the night of the ball I called for Bigot at half-past nine, and was startled at the sight of him, for he had arrayed himself in the costume of an American soldier (I was a young poilu), everything from rakish cap to trim puttees, *and he had shaved off his mustache!*

" Hello! " I exclaimed.

He grinned at me, a queer twisted grin.

" How do you like it? An improvement, eh? Thought I might as well go as a Yankee. Brothers in arms! France and America! Ha! Anyway, it will grow again in a month. Does it change me much? "

" Well, rather."

As a matter of fact, it made of Bigot a different man, and my heart sank, for I saw that at the last moment he had outwitted me. Still, Schillio and P. Theron might remember his eyes, those mean little pig-eyes. Nothing could change his eyes. And he wore his mutilated soldier's mask, scar and all, as I did, making use of the extra specimen of X. Stanopoulos' handiwork. Bigot was game enough for that.

I will not try to paint the picture of the gorgeous

opera fête. We arrived about ten, two mutilated veterans of the war, French and American, and the first persons we encountered as we passed up the great marble stairway were Schillio and P. Theron, waiting at the top in black masks and black-and-orange dominos, each decorated with a large sunflower, sewn securely fast, so there could be no danger of my missing them in the crush.

"Let us drink and be merry, Alan. I feel in the spirit of copious libations," Bigot announced, as if this were a novelty. "Come."

And forthwith he began to buy champagne, offering his hospitality to all who happened to be near him. Among these naturally were P. Theron and Schillio, both feeling awed at first in the midst of so much grandeur, but becoming adjusted to it after the third glass, and quite at home after the seventh. I saw that this was going to be a wet night.

"All life is illusion, my boy," remarked Bigot sententiously; "nothing about us is real. These ladies that seem to charm us are not real ladies, only shadows; this music is not real music; this wine is not real wine, but it tastes real; it contributes to the general illusion, and is therefore a worthy agency. Knowledge is vanity. Virtue is a waste of time. Industry is a sign of inferiority. My friends, fill your cups. You two gentlemen in orange and black — I drink to you. Two masks! Are we not all masks?

Alan, I salute you! Ladies and gentlemen, your humble servant. I forsee that we are about to enjoy ourselves."

And we did; at least Bigot did, and P. Theron did, and Schillio did. The next six hours were the wildest that I remember.

Six hours.

We left the opera ball a little before midnight — nine of us, including Schillio and P. Theron, to visit the " Jardin de ma Sœur," an expensive establishment in Montmartre with purple decorations, where (still masked) we sat among bored fashionables and listened to an Alabama nigger sing " On the Gin, Gin, Ginny Shore," and drank more champagne. It was here that Schillio had the adventure of his life, for a Spanish lady with languishing glances and many diamonds danced with him. If that vixen concierge wife of his could only have seen her hungry-eyed, hollow-cheeked Schillio!

We left here at half-past one, having annexed two other vagrants of the night, the Spanish lady and her cavalier, a little wizened old gentleman with dyed whiskers, who was very drunk and had no idea what was happening. Bigot gave a fifty-franc note with his usual flourish to the pompous door-man, and we were off in a string of taxi-cabs. From now on friend Emile assumed the honor and responsibilities of the party.

At half-past two we were in " Le Perroquet," a

garish place, with more champagne, more jazz, more niggers (some of them dancing with white women), and more bored fashionables. We pounded on the tables in time to the orchestra under the vigorous leadership of P. Theron, breeder of canary birds, who had long since removed his mask, as had the rest of us. I am free to confess that by this time I had almost forgotten the purpose of this strange pilgrimage. It is evident that I was never intended to be a detective.

At half-past three we were in "The Dead Rat," where Bigot made an address to pallid and painted representatives of the underworld. Then he started a novel competition between Schillio and the old gentleman with dyed whiskers, offering five hundred francs to whichever one of them could drink five glasses of champagne in five minutes, the Spanish lady to be timekeeper. The old gentleman won, and was carried out a little later and put under the pump.

At half-past four we dragged ourselves into "The Edge of Hell," where the attendants wore shrouds and phosphorescent skulls that were rather gruesome when the lights were turned down, or would have been, but for our condition. Schillio became hysterical, and almost started a fight among the habitués — cut-throats, disreputables, and a few leftover fashionables, the rear-guard of the night, who die but never surrender.

At half-past five we stumbled down some forbidding cellar steps and entered "La Punaise," the toughest and most sordid *boîte* in the Rue Pigalle (which is saying enough), and now, I am pleased to remember, I told Bigot it was necessary to draw the line somewhere, and this was the place to draw it. He smiled good-naturedly (being the only sober person in the party) and said he knew where to take us.

At six o'clock we drove to "Les Halles" in broad daylight, having lost several of our number *en route,* and partook of onion soup and glasses of fresh milk served by rosy-cheeked market women who had spent their night in sleeping.

To sleep! How I longed to sleep! I could have stretched out on a wooden bench, curled up on the stone pavement, and forgotten everything — Bigot, Schillio, P. Theron, and my wonderful plan to convict Pierre Launay's murderer. . . .

Ten hours later I awakened in a luxurious *hammam,* or Turkish-bath establishment, not far from the Madeleine church, which has had the honor of bringing back to sobriety more American millionaires, Russian grand dukes, and *bons viveurs* generally, than any other place in Europe.

And stretched out beside me on comfortable couches, dead to the world, were five valiant comrades of the night, Schillio, P. Theron, the little old

gentleman with dyed whiskers, and two others.

Bigot was not there.

And when later on I questioned Schillio and P. Theron, they were both positive they had never seen Emile Bigot before. They regarded him as a perfect gentleman, and hoped I would arrange that they might go on another party with him.

CHAPTER XVII

A TRAP FOR BIGOT

WHEN I told Marguerite of this adventure, she laughed until I thought she would seriously injure herself. Poor child, she had had little enough to laugh about for many months, and I really believe it did her good, although there came a coughing spell at the end. French doctors have a wonderful prescription that has saved many an ailing lady, *égayer Madame!* Well, this certainly *égayed* Marguerite. What especially tickled her fancy was the vision of Schillio, the half-starved, brow-beaten concierge from the Rue Orfila, in white gloves and a beatific smile, waltzing with the Spanish siren.

"It's too bad, though, that our wonderful scheme fell through, isn't it?" she sighed. "Those two men couldn't identify Bigot?"

"Identify him? Before we got through they couldn't have identified the Eiffel Tower. You see, Bigot wouldn't take his mask off at first, and when he did, it was too late. They both said he was the finest gentleman they had ever seen. No, they did not know him."

"Do you think he remembered them?"

"Perhaps he did. That worried me a little. They had their masks off for hours. But perhaps not. The concierge tells me he only met Jean Pitou a few times in the dark hall-way. And now — in a dress suit!"

"And white gloves. Oh dear!" Marguerite went off again into high amusement.

The result of it all was that we were back exactly where we were, and Blanche Launay was in as much danger as ever. I made sure of this by calling on her again, when I found her in the same state of agitation and nervous restlessness. She was more afraid of Bigot than ever, yet she admitted that he had called, since her last appeal to me, and both times she had seen him.

"It's like an obsession."

"Yes, it is," she admitted.

"What does he intend to do? What's his idea?"

"He wants to marry me," she said with a shiver of repulsion, "and — Alan, you must help me. I — I'm not sure of myself."

I was more than ever impressed by the seriousness of the situation, for it takes a real peril to make a woman forget her pride in an avowal like that. And Marguerite agreed with me when I told her. Thank heaven, her jealousy was gone.

"I wish I didn't feel that way about the letter, dear," she said sweetly.

" That's all right, old girl. We'll think of something else. Wait! "

Even as I spoke I thought of it. That letter of Pierre Launay — Perhaps I could make this serve, after all — in another way.

" What is it? "

" Nothing. You're sure that letter is perfectly safe in your uncle's hands? "

" Perfectly. He put it in the safe where he keeps his diamonds. I saw him."

" Good. Well, I must go. Look me in the eyes, you little darling! Now then! Up to ten! Ready? "

This referred to an ingenious kissing game devised by myself, that gave me much satisfaction.

I did not explain my new plan to Margie, because she would have objected to it, and because I was not sure whether it was really feasible. I had to think it over. If I carried this out, I might be getting myself into deep water, for I would create a direct issue with my formidable adversary that might, and probably would (in the event of my succeeding), lead to either his destruction or my own. To put it in a word, I planned to set a trap for Emile Bigot and bait it with Launay's letter.

I immediately sought out that amiable gentleman — not a difficult thing to do, since he never failed to put in an appearance at the Ritz bar during the absinthe hour — and, taking him away from his story-

telling cronies, I established him at a separate table for a heart-to-heart talk.

" What is it, my boy? " inquired Bigot in his genial fatherly way. " Are you getting up another party? "

I smiled ruefully.

" Not to any great extent. I've had parties enough to last me for some time. This is a serious matter. It has to do with my work. I want to ask your advice."

He studied me keenly, and I tried hard, as I looked into his pale blue eyes, to make out whether he suspected me of designs against him. Was his smiling frankness only dissimulation? Had he really recognized Schillio and P. Theron the other evening, and did he know quite well what their presence at my party meant? I could not tell. Never have I met so baffling a personality.

Bigot rubbed his fat hands together, studied his short finger-nails, then remarked:

" If we're going to be serious, we need stimulation. *Garçon!* Two sherry cobblers! A box of Abdullas! Now, sir, we will discuss work. Ambition, Achievement? All part of the Great Illusion. Chimeras, Vanities? However, what is it? "

I now proceeded in my most earnest and ingenuous manner to unfold for my companion's benefit a plan, or pretended plan, that might further my idea, but

was sure to bring me into peril, as indeed it did. I confided in Bigot that my status at the newspaper office was not just what it should be, owing to a diversion of my interests into other fields, and that it was time for me to do something conspicuously excellent in order to bring up my average.

"In other words, you're afraid of getting sacked?"

"Precisely."

"And you've thought out some bold stroke that may crown you with glory?"

"Well, if it doesn't do that, it may re-establish the Chief's confidence."

"Go on, gallant youth. You have some big beat in mind?"

"That's it. I think I can discover the man who killed Pierre Launay."

I said this quietly, and he received it without a flicker of excitement, blowing out a long cloud of Turkish cigarette smoke before replying.

"Ah! That would make 'em sit up and take notice, wouldn't it?" he approved. "But — how the devil ——?"

"I know, it seems impossible, after the Paris police have fallen down, only" — I dropped my voice impressively here — "I happen to have secret information that will solve the puzzle."

"Secret information? Good work! How did you get it?" He said this in the most detached way, without a shadow of personal interest.

At this I became still more mysterious, and continued:

"When I say I have this secret information, I mean that I know where it can be had. I know of a letter that Pierre Launay wrote just before his death, in which he names the man who killed him."

Was there an instant, just the fraction of an instant, when a savage flame shot out from underneath those bushy blond eyebrows? Did the habitual red of Bigot's countenance change to a paler flush? Perhaps I imagined this; in any event the flash of self-betrayal was gone instantly, and this amazing man resumed his meditative calm.

"That's like a woman telling about her son before the son is born, isn't it? Launay couldn't be *sure* who was going to kill him?"

"But he was sure, he told his executors."

Bigot stared at me, incredulous.

"Were you there?"

"I certainly was."

"Do I understand that he gave you the name of his murderer?"

"Not exactly," I hedged, "but he told us positively that he was going to be murdered."

"You don't tell me! Did he say what the man's motive was?"

I did my best to answer innocently:

"He said this man hated him for something he had done."

Bigot smiled as he saw his advantage growing.

"He didn't say what this thing was that the man hated him for, did he?"

"No."

Bigot threw out his hands, palms upward, in a movement of open-mindedness.

"Of course, we have the fact that Launay *was* killed, which seems startling; nevertheless, I am inclined to regard it as an extraordinary coincidence, nothing more. A mixture of coincidence and neurasthenia."

"You don't believe Launay knew he was going to be killed?"

"It isn't probable, is it? Did he take steps to protect himself?"

"No. We begged him to, but he said he didn't want to be protected."

"Less and less probable, my dear Alan."

"He wanted to die."

Bigot shrugged his shoulders.

"*Voyons, mon cher.* We reach an absurdity. He wants to die and he acts as if he doesn't want to. If

he had really wanted to die, he would have told you nothing. He would have killed himself. A neurasthenic, obviously."

"I see your point," I agreed guilelessly. "Still, if we had the name of the man who Launay *thought* was going to kill him, it might lead to something else. This man might be able to tell us things. The police would be glad to have a little friendly talk with him, wouldn't they?"

Bigot twisted his massive bald head and squinted his little eyes at me.

"The police!" he sniffed contemptuously.

"Well, I propose to get that name."

"How?"

"It's in this letter Pierre Launay wrote, the whole explanation of the murder is in that letter. *He told me so himself!*"

I have an idea this got just a wee bit under Bigot's belt, although he still controlled that impassive face of his.

"Suppose you tell me the whole story, just as it happened," he suggested, and now his keen intelligence was fully aroused. "Then I'll give you my advice."

So it came about that I told Emile Bigot the story of my particularly close relations with Pierre Launay, and of Launay's last solemn words to me re-

garding the letter he had written to Marguerite Mayol. I also explained why Marguerite was unwilling to break the seals of this letter at present, she regarded it as a matter of honor not to. In short, I told this blond scoundrel the whole truth, keeping back only (at least I hope I kept it back) my real reason for confiding in him, as well as my conviction that he himself was the murderer.

" And where is this letter now? " Bigot asked with a rather evident eagerness, which encouraged me.

" She gave it to her uncle to put in his safe."

" Who is her uncle? "

" A *bijoutier* in the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. That is the point. I want to ask your advice about getting the letter from him? Do you think I could persuade him to let me see this letter without Marguerite's consent — under the circumstances? "

" What circumstances? " he questioned sharply.

I was pleased to observe that Bigot's debonair manner was no longer in evidence. In fact, I thought I detected just the faintest suspicion of anxiety.

" Well, one thing is that Marguerite is trusting her uncle to guard this envelope inviolate for her until the time comes when she may open it."

" That's about three months? "

" Yes. Another point is that it's a sacred bequest left by a man who is dead. What argument can I

offer to the uncle that will persuade him to give me this letter? It seems like a double violation of faith, doesn't it? "

Bigot did not speak for fully a minute, then he tapped absently on the table while he held me under a steady scrutiny. When a waiter approached he motioned him away impatiently.

"I don't understand why you're in such a hurry about this," he said finally. "Why can't you wait three months? After all, it isn't your affair."

"As a newspaper man it is. Somebody else may find the clue, or the murderer may escape. I'd sooner act now, if I can only get hold of that letter. And I'm afraid of losing the chance if I got at the uncle in the wrong way. I suppose I must make it worth his while in some way. But how? "

I tried to give myself the air of a much-perplexed young man appealing for counsel to an old and wise friend. And I waited with restrained eagerness for a certain question from Bigot. If he asked this question, it would look as if he were falling into my trap. *And he asked it!*

"Where is this *bijoutier?* I might drop in and have a chat with him. I could buy a few things and get into conversation. That's easy enough. Then I could study him a bit and tell you how to handle him."

"Excellent! " I exclaimed, with a delight that was

not simulated. And then I gave Emile Bigot the jeweler's name and address: Henri Roussel, 20, Faubourg Saint Honoré.

My idea was that Bigot would try to get the letter for reasons of his own and by methods of his own, not depending upon the gentle art of conversation to accomplish this. In other words, I reasoned that if he really were the murderer, and saw his life in jeopardy through this statement of Launay's, he would feel that he must get this document and destroy it, even if he had to commit a crime. What was the robbing of an old-fashioned safe in a little shop in the Faubourg Saint Honoré to Emile Bigot? *And if he tried this, I would be waiting for him!*

CHAPTER XVIII

"LA TORTUE" OPERATES

I HAVE always had a great capacity for making blunders, but in this adventure, as I look back at it, I think I played my cards skillfully. Especially against such an adversary.

In the first place, I took a room in a lodging-house across the street from Henri Roussel's place in the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, with windows that gave directly upon the jeweler's shop. Next I promised my old newspaper friend, Jules Fontin (who happened to be out of a job), my entire salary if he would watch this *bijouterie* from dark until daylight for one week. Fontin had been a police reporter for years and knew the criminal game backwards. Besides, he was as strong as a horse and afraid of neither man nor devil. A great black-bearded fellow who might have made a brilliant success in life, but for one thing that I need not go into here.

With this much arranged, I went to Bigot again, apparently in great jubilation, and told him not to trouble about seeing Roussel, as I had had another talk with Marguerite and had been surprised to find her more reasonable; in fact, she was going to think

the matter over and let me know her decision the following Saturday night (this being Wednesday), when I would take her to the theater.

"You mean she may decide to let you open that envelope?" questioned Bigot.

"I'm almost sure she will. She's fond of me, and she knows I'm crazy about her, so you see ——"

He smiled cynically.

"Lovely woman! What is the sacred command of a dead man against a few teasing kisses from a live one?"

It struck me that Bigot was swimming nearer and nearer to the bait I was dangling before him.

"We'll have action before Sunday," I said to Jules Fontin, and charged him to keep his eyes open to their widest and keenest for the next three days.

As a matter of fact, we had action on Saturday night.

It was all very simple. Bigot had employed a capable *cambrioleur* to enter the jeweler's shop and take this envelope out of the safe. I had furnished my friend with ample details for the identification of the envelope — its shape, size, heavy seals, etc. — so that the burglar could make no mistake. He was partly to compensate himself (I found this out later) with some odd pieces of jewelry, not too many, that he might pick up.

Sunday morning early I was awakened by the *femme de chambre,* who informed me that I was wanted urgently on the telephone. I sprang up in an instant, knowing that it was Jules Fontin, and making my way along a hall and down one flight, I came to the instrument of torture. Oh, those French telephones!

Sure enough it was Jules, and he gave me excellent news. He had Bigot's burglar in safe custody and wanted me to come at once. He would be waiting in front of the jewelry store. In half an hour I was with him.

"Where is your man?" I asked, seeing him alone.

He glanced across the street.

"In my room over there, trussed up like a chicken," grinned my muscular friend. "Come and have a look at him."

"Did he give you much trouble?"

"Not a bit. He's a broken-winded old crook. Hasn't done much since he came out of the Santé prison the last time. I knew him in a minute. They've got him finger-printed and everything. Used to call him 'La Tortue.' Well named! He's slow. I waited until he had the safe opened . . . let him get the envelope. Then I caught his arm and twisted it. That was enough — he squealed. I made him put back

some jewelry he had taken and give me the envelope. Here you are."

Jules Fontin handed me the document, which I recognized by its ponderous black seals.

We found "La Tortue" in a woeful state of pentence and impuissant rage, rolling around on the floor cursing and pleading alternately, begging us, at any rate, to release him from the undignified position in which Jules Fontin had placed him. He might be an old and broken burglar, but that was no reason why this silly schoolboy trick of handkerchief-and-broomstick trussing should be played upon him. He had some traditions to live up to, *sang de dieu!* and if they must restrain him, let them at least use handcuffs.

To which tirade Jules Fontin listened with contemptuous indifference.

"That will be enough for you," he warned the prostrate *cambrioleur,* and "La Tortue" subsided.

"How many years will this man get if we turn him over to the police?" I winked at Jules, and the burglar groaned against his broomstick.

"Ten, maybe more. It depends on the judges. He's got a bad record."

"Listen, 'La Tortue,'" I said. "If we let you off, will you do what I tell you?"

The man rolled up distressful eyes at me.

"Anything you say, milord. Any little job you want done."

"I suppose you were to deliver this envelope to the man who hired you to do the job?"

"La Tortue" nodded.

"When?"

"At eleven o'clock this morning."

"Where?"

"In front of a *bureau de tabac* on the Rue Marbeuf. He's to come strolling out and I hand him the paper."

"And get your money?"

"*Oui,* Monsieur."

"How much? Don't lie."

"Why should I lie? He promised me a thousand francs."

"And the jewelry?"

"Well — yes."

"He put the jewelry back in the safe," interposed Fontin.

"I know. Now, my friend, I'm going to give you a chance to get out of this mess. After all, you're not the one most to blame. I want you to carry out the arrangement exactly as it was made. You are to deliver the envelope to this man — by the way, do you know his name?"

"No!"

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No!"

"Very well. You are to take the thousand francs that he gives you and keep it, and promise never to speak to him again or go near him. If you do——" I glanced at Jules Fontin.

"If you do," Jules supplied, "I'll break your neck, and then we'll have what's left of you sent up for the limit. Remember, I'll always know where to find you, 'La Tortue,'" he warned.

The burglar eagerly agreed to these conditions, and we left him to his perplexed meditations, after explaining that Fontin would be back presently with further instructions.

"What's the idea?" asked my friend as we came away.

"Wait!" said I, glancing at my watch. It was half-past eight, and there was much to be done before eleven. "Let's see, you've got a car, haven't you? And you can drive it yourself?"

"Drive it myself? Drive a car?" the big fellow answered with offended dignity. "See here, my son, I was driving cars when you were toddling around with a nurse. I drove in the Paris-Madrid race in 1902."

"Good. When we get through with this burglar, I

want you to drive him to Bordeaux or Toulouse or any other distant town and leave him there. But don't race. Take it easy. Stay with 'La Tortue' until you hear from me. I wouldn't trust him not to give this thing away to Bigot, if he gets a chance."

"He won't get a chance. Do you mind if I take him to Marseille? I'd love to see the Cannebierre once more before I die and eat some *bouilla-baisse.*"

"Take him to Timbuctoo, if you want to. And remember that salary arrangement lasts until you get back. Perhaps I can persuade Bigot to pay it."

Fontin was delighted.

"Now get your car," I continued. "Is it in good shape?"

"Always — up to the minute."

"Are there curtains that pull down over the windows?"

Fontin beamed at me.

"Lover's curtains? *Certainement!* My car is a real car."

"All right. Now, here is the program. Pack up what you need for this trip and call for me at the Rue Jacob at half-past ten sharp. See?"

"*Bien.*"

"Have 'La Tortue' on the front seat beside you. Can you manage him? I'll lend you my Browning if you want it."

"Keep your pistol. I've got that old bird scared stiff. If he moves, I — I'll pulverize him."

With this arranged I went back to my apartment and spent a careful hour in producing an envelope that was in all respects like the one taken from Jean Roussel's safe — seals, superscription, everything — except that the two sheets folded within, and addressed, contained nothing more startling than an admirable homily on a young woman's behavior and spiritual development that I had copied from a volume of essays by the French philosopher Fénelon. It amused me to think of Bigot scowling over this.

Having now taken the last precaution that occurred to me, I lay down and rested until Marie Louise announced that two gentlemen were waiting below in an automobile. Just so!

Allons! The curtain was rising on the last act of this personally conducted drama. I placed the original envelope in the safest drawer of my desk, turned the key twice upon it, made sure that my Browning could be used in an emergency, and went down to the street.

There sat "La Tortue" on the front seat, his *casquette* pulled down over furtive eyes, his mustache flaring out fuzzily above yellow teeth. A bad citizen! Rather the worse for wear just now, slumped into a forlorn heap under the scornful surveillance of Jules Fontin, yet still vaguely hopeful. I am sure he was

secretly jubilant at the thought that something was about to be put over — he did not know just what, nor care — upon his sinister employer.

I gave Jules a few words of final instructions and we were off. Down the Rue de Seine and across the river, then swiftly along the quay to the great Alexander III bridge, where gigantic golden horses awe the beholder, then a short way up the Avenue George V to the Rue de la Tremoille, then into the Rue Clemont Marot, where we drew up at the curb to allow " La Tortue " to descend.

" Remember, I'm right behind you," threatened Fontin. " If you try anything crooked, I'll smash every bone you've got. *Va, cochon!* "

" La Tortue " saluted respectfully.

" *Compris, patron,*" he muttered, and shuffled off, carrying in his hand, conspicuously displayed, the fake envelope Jules Fontin had given him.

The car trailed along slowly, keeping to the other side of the street. I looked at my watch and saw that it was five minutes to eleven. We were in time. And at this exact moment, as a good omen, the sun came out from behind grey clouds, which was doubly encouraging, as I now proposed to take a photograph.

At the first corner " La Tortue " turned to the right into the Rue Marbeuf. The *bureau de tabac* was a

hundred yards ahead. I could see the purple-and-red glass sign. This was the rendezvous where Emile Bigot was to get the faked precious document. I drew down the curtain of the car window, unfolded my little camera, and as we stopped before the shop of an expensive shirt-maker just facing the tobacco-shop, I reflected that, whatever happened now, I had done my best. The issue was on the knees of the gods.

Five minutes passed and nothing happened. No sign of Bigot. Was it possible he was not coming? Had he taken alarm? Was this to be another failure? Had I embarked upon too ambitious an undertaking? My heart sank. Then suddenly I got a kicking thrill at a sign from "La Tortue," who had retraced his steps as if he were doing patrol duty along the block. The burglar glanced back toward the Avenue des Champs Elysées, and once more faced about with the movement of a man who sees the thing he has been waiting for. The thing he saw was Emile Bigot approaching in leisurely style from the fashionable boulevard, twirling his cane. Ah!

After this events moved rapidly. Bigot entered the tobacco-shop, according to their arrangement. "La Tortue" sidled up and waited outside, bending over as if to fix a shoe-lace. Inside the shop Bigot tossed some money on the counter for cigars and opened the

door. " La Tortue " straightened up and tendered the paper. I aimed my Kodak through the curtain-crack, and the sun was full on both men (I saw them in the finder) as Emile Bigot took the envelope from the burglar. At this instant I pressed the button.

CHAPTER XIX

MARGUERITE CHANGES HER MIND

I NOW had Pierre Launay's letter in my possession, although the seals were still unbroken. A powerful weapon against Emile Bigot, assuming this document to contain the information I believed it did. But suddenly I found myself thinking of Marguerite, of her faith in me, of her feeling that the sacredness of this envelope must not be violated. After all, it was her property, and in tampering with it I should be violating her admonition. It was rather late in the day to think of this, but so it happened, and I saw that I simply could not break these seals without my sweetheart's permission. I must go to her at once and confess what I had done and make another appeal.

When I reached the apartment in the Rue Ponthieu, I was disturbed to meet my fellow-executor, the doctor, coming out, and I did not like the look in his face.

"I haven't very good news for you, Esterbrooke," he said. "Mademoiselle Mayol sent for me in the night, and — I'm afraid it's her old trouble."

"Not — not pneumonia?"

"I hope not, but — she must be careful. Try not to agitate her."

"I brought her these strawberries" — I indicated a box on my arm — "they're big ripe ones, just up from the Riviera. Any harm in that?"

He shook his head.

"You can show them to her. It will please her. But — she'd better not eat them — not more than one or two."

Therese, tearful-eyed, received me and showed me into the little *salon,* where I waited through some ominous minutes, then I was allowed to go into the bedroom where Marguerite was lying. She had put on a bright dressing jacket and her lovely dark hair was becomingly arranged, held by two ornaments that I had given her. She did not look particularly ill, although I realized the significance of a fevered flush in her cheeks.

"Dear boy, I'm so glad you came." She took my hand fondly. "I'm afraid I don't look very nice. I've had a bad time since I saw you. Last night I — I had a coughing spell — it seemed as if I couldn't get my breath. But I'm all right now. The doctor has helped me — he's such a comforting man. Sit down." She drew me to the bed. "What have you brought me, Alan?"

I unfastened the ribbons of the box and showed her the great luscious berries, each one tucked away in its nest of cotton like babies in a cradle.

"What splendid ones!" Marguerite cried, and,

calling for sugar in a saucer, proceeded to sample them. But suddenly she grew weak and sank back against the pillows.

" My strength seems to give out all in a moment," she sighed. " I wish we could go into Normandie, the way you said, and see the orchards bloom, the gardens —— "

" Perhaps we can — later."

" Later! " she echoed wistfully.

Marguerite asked how my work was going, and expressed the same sweet confidence as of old in my splendid future.

" I'm so proud of you and your friendship, Alan," she said. " I want you to be worthy of my faith in you."

" You've set the mark too high, old girl. I expect I'll just plug along — never set any rivers on fire."

" I won't have you talk that way. You can do anything you want to do. The trouble is you don't care enough."

" I care about you," I said, and if I put into my words half the tenderness that I felt, she must have been touched.

" My dear! " she whispered. " It was wonderful what you said the other night. It has made me so happy since I've been lying here to know that you want me — for your wife."

" That's all I care about," I told her.

Marguerite took my hand and patted it softly.

"*Je t'aime, chéri.* There are things I'd like to say, but — I can't. I've got my wicked pride. There! I'm getting a little tired."

She was seized with a fit of coughing and Therèse, entering hurriedly, motioned me to go out.

For nearly an hour I sat in the next room — waiting. A horrible hour! What thoughts passed through my mind! What miseries of doubt and regret! My poor, poor darling!

It was plain that at a moment like this I could not speak to Marguerite about Pierre Launay's letter. It would agitate her beyond her strength. She had said decidedly that this letter must not be opened until the date indicated, and it would require strenuous argument to convince her to the contrary. Argument was out of the question. I must give up this plan.

But Blanche Launay? And my solemn assurance that I would protect her? What was I to do?

While I was fretting over this, Thérèse came in to say that Marguerite wished to see me again. She was rested now. It was one of her bad spells that had passed.

Marguerite spoke cheerfully. There was nothing to worry about. The trouble was she had neglected to take the medicine the doctor had left her. It served her right.

" There's one little thing I can do for you, Alan." She smiled tenderly. " You know that letter from Pierre Launay — the one you asked me for. I've been thinking it over, and — I was rather silly to make such a fuss."

" You weren't silly."

" Yes, I was. Now I want you to have this letter — I've written a line to my uncle asking him to give it to you."

" But you told me —— "

" Can't a woman change her mind? " She laughed. " Besides, it says I am not to read what is inside before a certain date. It doesn't say *you* are not to read it. I authorize you to read it, then do whatever you think best — give it back to me, tear it up, anything."

" It's wonderful of you to do this, Margie."

" My darling! "

She looked at me a long time without speaking. Her lips trembled, her eyes began to fill with tears; but she controlled her agitation and went on with sweet seriousness: " I'm sure you wouldn't have asked for it, if it wasn't right that you should have it. There. This is a line to my uncle."

And so I came into honorable possession of Pierre Launay's letter.

CHAPTER XX

LETTER WRITTEN BY PIERRE LAUNAY TO MARGUERITE MAYOL, TO BE HELD BY HER UNOPENED UNTIL A CERTAIN DATE

My Dear Mademoiselle Mayol, —

When you read these lines I shall have long since passed into the realm (if such there be) where we poor mortals can make no more mistakes, and where the ones we have made are forgiven. I am writing this on the eve of my departure for the long journey, a moment when a man wishes to make amends, if it is possible, for any harm he may have done.

The unhappy part of it is we can seldom make amends for harmful acts, for wrongs done to others. It is too late. The evil impulses started by us have gone forth irremediably, spreading in wider and wider circles. We can never call them back.

At this supreme moment, as I am about to die, I stand convicted of a crime against my fellow men. I have written books and plays (especially one book) that have had a corrupting influence of incalculable extent. You know the book I refer to. You know how your father felt about it — what he said. Your father

was entirely right. I humbly ask his forgiveness, as I ask yours.

As a proof of my sincerity I now confess to you something that I could not force myself to tell either my wife or my best friends for the shame of it. I have chosen you for this confidence because I am to some extent responsible for your sufferings, and because I believe you will show me mercy as far as this is compatible with doing what is right. I hereby place my reputation unreservedly in your hands to do with as you see fit. If you feel that I have not been sufficiently punished in surrendering my life and most of my fortune, then take whatever shreds of honor I still possess and cast them to the winds. Let every one know that Pierre Launay's fame rested upon a lie, that he was not only a writer of evil books and plays, but a man who stole another man's glory, who took the credit for a beautiful work that he did not write.

For many years I have been acclaimed as the author of *Le Cœur d'un Enfant*, one of the sweetest stories in the French language. I have accepted this homage as my just due. I have never breathed the truth to a living soul. Now I solemnly state that I had nothing to do with *Le Cœur d'un Enfant*, except to buy the manuscript years ago from a poor journalist who sold it to me for a thousand francs when

neither of us dreamed that it would prove to be a masterpiece. The man who wrote this story and is entitled to all the glory is Emile Bigot, a totally unknown person who disappeared soon after our transaction. I supposed he had drunk himself to death long since; but he turned up in Paris about a month ago. He had come in search of me. He hates me with a diabolical hatred. He is going to kill me.

You may wonder why I do not protect myself against this man, since I know that he is going to kill me. The answer is that I do not wish to be protected. I am weary of everything, above all, of my wretched existence. Bigot will be doing me a favor. I only hope that nothing changes him. But nothing will. If ever a human being was consumed by a fiendish intention, Bigot is the man. He will be relentless. I shall surely die.

Let me make my guilt quite clear to you. The fact that I purchased all rights to the *Le Cœur d'un Enfant* offers no justification. A man cannot buy glory. It was my duty, as soon as the book made a success, to announce the name of the author. In not doing so, and in accepting the immense acclaim that has resulted, I behaved in a dishonorable way. For all these years I have lived without honor. I cannot bear it any longer. If Emile Bigot had not happened along with his avenging will I should have been forced

to overcome my cowardice and do justice upon myself. Life is unendurable.

Now, my dear Mademoiselle Mayol, I have told you the whole truth — no one else knows it — and it rests with you whether it shall be given to the world or not. Once more I ask your forgiveness, and as I leave this sad place where you and I have suffered, I send you kind thoughts. Farewell.

PIERRE LAUNAY.

P.S. You will understand why I ask you not to read this letter for six months. I am still a coward. I cannot bear to have my dishonor known — even after I am dead.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DÉCLANCHEMENT

I COME now to a swift sweep of happenings as strange as any man was ever caught in. While it was obviously my duty to protect Blanche Launay from Bigot's unscrupulous advances, I did not quite realize what was involved in opposing my sandy-haired friend. The French have a word *déclanchement,* a sort of pulling the trigger on events. That was it; I had pulled the trigger.

For weeks I had been convinced that we could clear up this mystery and dispose of Bigot if we had the enlightenment of Pierre Launay's letter to Marguerite. Well, we had this enlightenment now; it was perfectly good enlightenment, too; but there remained the problem of definitely dealing with our bald-headed adversary, and I began to have an uncomfortable feeling that this might not be as simple a matter as it appeared. Even with the odds against him Bigot was a desperate and unscrupulous fighter.

In laying out my plan I saw that I must take the responsibility of acting without the knowledge or consent of my fellow executors, for I was sure the priest would stand against any step that might lead to a

revelation of the truth. I must therefore do whatever was to be done as an individual, not as an executor. If this were making too fine a distinction, I could not help it; unless I did something to prevent it, Blanche Launay would come under Bigot's domination, and this was too ghastly a thing to take any risks about.

Of course, I could go to the police with Pierre Launay's letter and have Bigot arrested on the charge of murder, but that would inevitably bring out the motive of the crime and result in Launay's disgrace. So I must *not* go to the police.

Then what?

In this dilemma I called on Madame Launay and reported that I was now almost sure of success in my effort to protect her, but that I must ask her co-operation.

" I'll do anything you say," the poor lady promised.

" Tell me, first," I asked, " if Bigot is still calling on you — making his play for you, as we put it in America. Is he? Never mind the details, Madame, I just want to be sure you can't handle the situation yourself. You're still afraid of this man? "

" I hate him, loathe him, but —— " She bowed her head, clasping and unclasping her hands. " How you must despise me! " she murmured.

" I think we're all weak in one way or another, only some of us won't admit it. Now here's one last ques-

tion: I take it you'll be all right if Bigot is away from Paris? You wouldn't go running after him to some other city? "

"*Grand Dieu! Non!*" she cried.

"Good! Now here is my plan. I shall spend this evening at the Ritz with Bigot and do what is necessary to be done. See? It may take several hours — I don't know."

Blanche Launay shivered apprehensively.

"Alan, you won't be in danger? He is capable of — anything."

"I know. That's why I want your help. This will make it interesting for you — give you a part in our success."

"If we succeed! "

"We've got to succeed. We're going to force Bigot to get out of Paris and stay out."

"How? "

"You mustn't ask how. You mustn't know — ever. I'm doing this alone."

"But the danger? "

"There won't be any. I shall have three men guarding Bigot's apartment. And I'm taking other precautions, in case there's any slip. Now then, I want you to call me up there at ten o'clock — not before, not after. That's your job. Will you do it? Just

call me up in Bigot's apartment and listen to what I say — that's all, but it's important."

"You can depend on me — exactly at ten o'clock."

"Good-bye! Don't worry," I said to her, assuming a confidence that I did not altogether feel. "We're going to put this man entirely out of business."

CHAPTER XXII

BIGOT FINGERS HIS SCARF-PIN

THERE are various kinds of sport in this humdrum world: tiger hunting in India, tarpon fishing off the coast of Florida; there is the steeple-chase, the prize-fight; and there is the pursuit of a murderer, the final running down of a murderer. I had this last experience with Emile Bigot and found it sufficiently thrilling; in fact there was a certain quarter of an hour during that night after my talk with Blanche Launay when it was a question whether I would leave Bigot's apartment alive, or not.

Oddly enough Bigot sent for me — I found his urgent dinner invitation when I got home — and thus precipitated the issue. I was to meet him at the Ritz at eight to hear about an important change in his plans, and was punctual to the minute.

I must say Bigot gave me an excellent dinner (there were just the two of us) and proved himself a delightful host, as he had on previous occasions. The menu was worthy of a Prime Minister, and my companion outdid himself to be entertaining. I felt almost guilty as the moment approached, when I should be called upon rudely to awaken him from his trium-

phant dream. And, a vague apprehensiveness stole over me as I listened to this brilliant but unspeakable scoundrel. What would he do when I told him, as presently I must, that I *knew* he was Pierre Launay's assassin? That I had in my possession absolute proof of this? I began to wish I had brought my friendly little Browning as a companion in the adventure. After all, we were alone in Bigot's private suite where our meal was served — quite alone, when he had dismissed the waiter.

"Now my enthusiastic young friend," my companion began in his quizzical way after we had settled ourselves comfortably, "I will come to an important matter that I have to lay before you. I hope this will interest you and please you. I am sure it will be to your advantage. Don't think me impertinent if I ask how much the enterprising sheet that publishes your writings from day to day pays for your services."

I named the modest stipend that I was accustomed to draw every week, and my companion lifted his shoulders compassionately.

"I was afraid it was like that. A man of your talents! I call it an outrage, Esterbrooke. They ought to be ashamed of themselves. Fortunately I am in a position to remedy this. If you accept my proposition your salary will be immediately doubled and, later on ——" He waved his hand in a large way that

seemed to sweep the horizon, and carried with it a suggestion of infinite possibilities.

I said nothing, held by the grim humor of the situation, and Bigot went on, fixing me with his little blinking eyes in a heart-to-heart way he had when he wished to put over something important. I knew the signs and tried to imagine what could be back of this excessive friendliness. What service was he counting on from me? Could it be that some subtle intuition warned him of a new peril in his path?

" My boy, you resemble me in several respects — you are intelligent, fond of excitement; you like the unconventional thing, you believe that the man who wants to get something worth while out of life must be willing to take risks now and then; am I right? "

God forbid that I should acknowledge myself to be like Emile Bigot, but one must dissemble in certain difficult situations, and I nodded in apparent acquiescence.

" I say this," he continued in his grandiloquent manner, " because I like you: I find in you a sympathetic spirit, and now that fortune is smiling on me and pointing a rosy finger toward the future, toward pleasurable wanderings. . . . I am happy to feel that I can share these joys with a companion of my liking. Does the prospect appeal to you, my dear Alan? "

Pleasurable wanderings! I caught at this phrase.

" You mean you are going on a journey and want me to go with you? "

He held up to the light his glass of Cordial Medoc, admiring its rich color, then sipping a little meditatively.

" Exactly. A long and wonderful journey. We shall visit strange corners of the world, places off the track — some of those islands in the South Pacific where steamers never touch, where life goes on in languorous ease, as it has gone for centuries; in short, the sensuous, intoxicating life of the semi-tropics, far away from stultifying, coward-making civilization. We may return in a year . . . two years, by the way of China and Russia. I will show you things in those giant lands, my good friend, that you have never dreamed of."

" Nothing would delight me more than a trip like that," I answered truthfully, " if only —— "

" Wait; there is no *' if only '* about it. This thing is going to be. We are in a position to do it. We're going to do it. I think I know what the mental reservation is that you were about to make. Shall we say — a lady? "

" Perhaps," I smiled, leading him on.

" A lady whom you love sincerely, one to whom you would be glad to bring happiness after her sufferings; in short, Mademoiselle Mayol. Forgive me,

Alan, if I presume upon our friendship. You know you have confided in me."

"That's all right. It's true I have a deep affection for Mademoiselle Mayol."

"Then have no anxiety on that score. She shall go with us. Man is a poor creature without the woman of his choice. Nature's rarest beauties would soon pall on him. But with that dear one at your side, the wife, the sweetheart — eh, my boy?"

"But — that's going to be a very expensive trip, isn't it? I don't quite see how I could be useful enough to you to justify ——"

Bigot leaned back in his chair and looked at me in good-natured appraisal.

"Don't worry about that. Of course you are right in assuming that I would not make such an offer — an offer that must seem tempting — unless there were important duties that I wish to entrust to you, and that I believe you are qualified to perform."

Did his pale eyes harden into an intenser gleam as I sat silent, unconvinced, waiting for further enlightenment?

Then came the truth, tactfully, I may say tenderly presented, but so revolting that I could not hide the shock I suffered. To put it with brutal brevity, Bigot was infatuated with Blanche Launay and wished to

marry her. He thought I could help him in his love-making.

I stared at him in horror — this monster!

" Good God! " I burst out.

" You think it unsuitable? But my dear Alan, why? I suppose you have in mind that painful matter I told you about — the wrong I suffered at the hands of Pierre Launay. But that is far in the past. Besides, the fault was his — you know that. He admitted it. He did his best to make atonement. He left me a fortune. He — what's the matter, man? "

I was unable to control myself any longer. I forgot all about tact, diplomacy, prudence — everything except my loathing for this blackguard.

" I can't stand any more of this. I didn't suppose there was such a vile creature in the world."

" Wh — what? " stammered Bigot.

" I know what you've done. I know all about you. I just let you go on talking to see how far your impudence would carry you. Well, you've talked enough. I'll talk now. If you hadn't sent for me, I should have sent for you. I have orders to give you."

" Orders? Have you gone crazy? "

" I said orders. Listen! You are to see Madame Launay once more — the last time. You are to tell her —— "

" Stop! " He almost leaped from his fauteuil in the violence of his fury. " Not another word! Don't move. I see that you know certain things. Very well. The game isn't played out yet. I may tell you that your precious young life at this moment isn't worth —— "

By a violent effort he checked his anger, lighted a cigarette with deliberation, watched the burning match, blew out the flame and tossed aside the blackened end; then he completed his sentence:

" — isn't worth a dead match."

My fate was wavering in the balance like that feeble flame. I knew Bigot would kill me with utter indifference if he decided that this was the proper move to make in the game he was playing.

" There! I am calm. I have controlled myself. You may observe my attitude in this emergency," he remarked with renewed assurance. " I waste no time in vain denials. I admit the — the essential fact. You have your proofs — you will show them to me presently, simply as a matter of form? "

" I will show them to you."

" Good! The immediate question is how shall I deal with you? You are interfering with my plans, Mr. Esterbrooke. I allow no one to interfere with my plans."

He watched me with keen, cruel eyes, and I realized that he was making up his mind.

" It wouldn't be so easy to get away with anything like that, would it? " I observed with as much coolness as I could summon. " We're not on a desert island you know. Besides, I'm not entirely helpless."

Bigot drew at his cigarette, inhaled the smoke deeply, then forced it out in silver circles that rose toward the ceiling, widening.

" You haven't a chance on earth — if I choose. You see this scarf-pin? " He drew forth from his cravat a large pearl set in platinum and small diamonds. " Look! I turn the head of it — there! Now then! I have only to touch you — the slightest scratch. You will not live one minute. Not half a minute! Paralysis of the throat — the heart. You drop! Not a sound! Deadlier than prussic acid, and not a trace left! That's foresight."

I believe if I had moved back in alarm he would have struck at me then and there like a snake. But somehow I managed to sit still and smile — it must have been an involuntary smile, for I was frightened; his eyes were enough to frighten anyone.

" There might be awkward developments in an hotel like this," I managed to say. " Besides, I've had a little foresight myself. Don't you suppose I knew what I was getting into when I came here? An American newspaper man isn't exactly a new-born babe."

He studied me again to see if I were lying. I said

before that Bigot would have made a wonderful poker player. Now he laid down his hand.

" I see. It's the old thing, the time limit. You have told some one that if you are not at a certain place at an indicated hour, then an envelope is to be opened and directions followed — yes? "

" That's about it," I acknowledged.

He pondered this while he played with the scarf-pin, apparently fascinated by its iridescent colors.

" Perhaps you win," he concluded finally, " I say *perhaps*. It looks as if you win. I have pushed my luck too far. Well, suppose we come to details. Those proofs — I'd like to see them."

" Certainly — there! " I handed him Pierre Launay's statement, and he read it over carefully, not missing a word, nor betraying in any way the emotion he must have felt, except by a slight tightening of the fingers of one hand as he moved them slowly with the motion of rolling a cigarette.

" I see. This is the real letter that Pierre Launay wrote. I knew the other was simply a concoction — not very clever either."

" Clever enough for my purpose," I countered. " I got away with it."

Bigot drummed meditatively on the arm of his chair.

" I suppose this is a copy? "

" Naturally."

" The original is — er —— ? "

" In the hands of the police under seal, with instructions from me to be read and acted on when the time-limit expires."

He continued his drumming.

" You and I are too intelligent, Mr. Esterbrooke, to split hairs over unimportant details. I'm a man who makes up his mind and acts. I may tell you that I have come safely out of worse scrapes than this. I take it you are ready to make reasonable terms with me? You do not wish a scandal? "

Underneath those yellow eyebrows I caught a gleam of the man's old swaggering impudence. How quickly he sensed this one advantage that was left him. We did not wish a scandal.

" No," I admitted.

" After all, I did write *Le Cœur d'un Enfant?* "

" I know."

" You wish to be reasonable, so do I. Well, you started to say something about my seeing Madame Launay — once more. When do you wish me to see her? "

" Immediately — to-morrow."

" And I am to tell her — what? "

" You are to tell her the truth, acknowledge that you killed her husband. We bind ourselves on the other hand, she and I, not to divulge this confession."

Bigot produced a notebook from his pocket, opened

it in a business-like way, drew forth a fountain pen, and wrote: " ' First requirement, tell Madame Launay the whole truth, acknowledge face to face that I killed her husband.' Go on. I agree to that."

" You are to surrender to Madame Launay one million francs of the million and a half you have received."

His eyes burned on me venomously, his lips tightened, his red face grew purple with suppressed rage; but he controlled himself and wrote: " ' Second requirement, surrender a million to Madame Launay.' Go on, I agree to that," he said.

" As soon as this business has been attended to, say within one week, you are to leave France and never return."

" No," retorted Bigot. " I refuse. Absolutely and peremptorily I refuse. I prefer to end everything *now* — you first, then myself."

He glared at me like a beast at bay, and I knew he would make good his words. In my turn I yielded.

" Very well, cut that out."

" If you think I'm going to give up Paris, when I still have half a million ——— "

In spite of myself I smiled. Here was a human touch after all.

At this moment the gilt clock over the fire-place began to strike ten, and before it had finished the

telephone rang sharply. Blanche Launay had not forgotten.

" That's for me," I said. " Excuse me."

I went to the instrument and at once recognized Madame Launay's voice.

" Mr. Esterbrooke? You told me to call you at ten. I have something important to —— "

I interrupted her, speaking for effect: " That's all right. I understand. I want you to notify the parties in question that matters are progressing satisfactorily. Call me again in fifteen minutes — exactly fifteen minutes."

I paused, and her voice came distinct over the wire, so that I motioned Bigot to move away beyond the range of hearing, which he did with a shrug of indifference.

" Listen! " She spoke excitedly. " I've just had a long distance call from the detective I employed. He says he has found the murderer."

" What? " I nearly dropped the telephone receiver. Yes. There's no doubt about it. He has run the man down."

" Where is he — in Paris? "

" No. In a place about four hours from Paris. He hasn't arrested the man yet; but he will to-night."

" Great guns! " I muttered.

" I thought you ought to know."

"Thank you. I'll see you the first thing in the morning."

I hung up and turned to Bigot.

"You seem surprised," he remarked pleasantly. "I trust nothing has gone wrong with your plans."

"My plans are all right. That was another matter." I tried to dissimulate, but his attitude changed immediately as if he divined that something had happened in his favor; which indeed was the case, for how could I ask him to sign a confession that he was Pierre Launay's murderer in the face of this news that the murderer had been found?

"There is one last point in our arrangements," I resumed, feeling that I might as well go through with the thing. "You may say this is unfair — it *is* unfair — but I can't help it. We intend to protect Pierre Launay's memory. The point is you are not to claim the authorship of *Le Cœur d'un Enfant*. You haven't claimed it for twenty years, so — you must be accustomed to the deprivation. I'm sorry, but there isn't any other way."

He scowled at me, still drumming.

"Oh, hell! What's the difference? I agree to that."

"We must have absolute certainty that you will keep this promise. We must make sure that never, under any circumstances, will you be tempted to divulge this secret."

"I don't see how ——"

"Wait. You will see. I want you to give me a written confession of your crime, an acknowledgment that you killed Pierre Launay."

"No!" he answered. "I won't do that."

"Why not? You acknowledge the fact, don't you?"

"Yes, but I refuse to put it into written words."

"Your statement will be sacredly guarded by the executors. It will never be used against you as long as you keep your mouth shut."

Bigot sat silent, his face twitching, his hands moving nervously; then suddenly, as if something inside him had broken, he began to laugh hysterically. I never heard such laughter — harsh, mirthless, horrible. He laughed until he was black in the face, breathless.

"Don't mind me," he gasped. "I — I'll be all right. I'm a little knocked out by — all this. I'll give you the statement — in the morning."

That was the best I could do. He insisted he was unable to talk any more or do anything more until he had slept. As a matter of fact I was exhausted myself. And horribly perplexed. It was after midnight. We had endured this tension for over four hours. So I consented to a postponement. I would come back in the morning at eleven. And I warned Bigot that

his apartment was under surveillance. It would be idle for him to try to escape.

"That's all right," he said as I look my leave. "I don't care how many detectives you put on my trail. You can call out the fire department, you can mobilize the whole French army. I don't give a damn."

He began to laugh again like a maniac, and the last thing I heard as I made my way down the soft carpeted stairs were those discordant peals of horrible merriment.

CHAPTER XXIII

BIGOT BETS A THOUSAND FRANCS

When I called at the Ritz the next morning, Bigot was finishing his *petit déjeuner,* and seemed quite recovered from his agitation of the previous night. He was smartly dressed in a sports suit with a carnation in his buttonhole, and looked like a prosperous Englishman ready for the races. I was glad to observe that he wore a different scarf-pin.

He greeted me in a most friendly manner, told me he had slept well, and invited me to go with him to a prize-fight that night at the Buffalo Stadium. What a man!

I reminded him that we had serious matters to attend to, whereupon, with a bored sigh, he had the breakfast-things cleared away and we settled down to business.

"I haven't forgotten our little unpleasantness of last evening, Esterbrooke," he said with his genial smile of a man of the world. "I am to give you a statement — I know. Don't worry. I have it here, written out in detail with the greatest care; but there are a few points that require explanation. Do you mind if I give myself the pleasure of a cigar first? I always was a procrastinator. Will you join me?"

"I don't mind," said I.

"Great thing a quiet smoke, eh?" He settled back in his *fauteuil*. "If there are any little questions you'd like to ask before we bring up our heavy artillery, why, fire away. I love to satisfy the curiosity of an intelligent man."

"Thanks," I acknowledged, trying to meet his debonair mood. "Well, there are one or two things I should like to know. For example, what was your idea in inviting me to go with you on that trip around the world? Was it a bribe? Did you think I suspected you?"

"I knew you did."

"If I had gone on the trip, I suppose I would never have come back?"

He gave me an amused glance.

"I'm afraid there might have been an accident — you can understand that — in those primitive islands."

"I see. Here's another thing. That story you told me about knowing Marguerite Mayol. Was there any truth in it?"

"Not a bit. I never saw the young lady. That was merely to puzzle you. I love a clever lie."

I thought again.

"Why did you wait all these years before starting your plan of vengeance against Pierre Launay?"

Bigot's face darkened.

"I don't think I can tell you that — I mean I don't care to tell you."

"Can't you give me an idea?"

"Oh, well! Why not? For seven years I was a vagabond, drifting over the earth. I didn't care. After that I — I was *restrained* in my movements."

"Oh!"

We smoked on in silence.

"Were you surprised when Launay left you the money?" I asked.

"Not in the least. He was a neurasthenic. A neurasthenic is capable of anything. That's one of the penalties of success. I remember meeting an immensely rich Persian in Teheran — vast oil interests — started as a camel-boy in Bagdad. I did him a little service, and one evening he said to me ——"

"Oh, no! Please!" I interrupted.

Bigot grinned.

"All right. Anything else?"

I tried to think of something else, but could not. I knew that if I questioned him about his previous confession to Blanche Launay (when he was ill) and his subsequent repudiation of this, he would simply tell me another lie. What was the use?

"If you are ready now, we may as well take up our real business," I said.

"Very well. I'm ready. Believe me, my eager young

friend, you are entered for a sensation. Unless I miss my guess, you will admit that what I am about to tell you is the most *renversant* thing you ever heard of."

I was not impressed by this statement, which I took to be one of Bigot's habitual exaggerations, and was little prepared for what was now to come.

"The statement you asked for, Mr. Esterbrooke," my companion began in his suavest manner, "is a formal confession that I killed Pierre Launay; am I correct?"

"Quite so."

"I am also to acknowledge this to Madame Launay — tell her face to face?"

"Yes."

Bigot drew meditatively on his cigar before proceeding.

"Not a pleasant communication to make to a widow one has been making love to, eh? Why do you want me to tell her personally?"

"I want to be sure the breach between you and Madame Launay is irrevocable. I don't see how you ever had the callousness to think of marrying her."

Bigot pondered this.

"No? I might explain it in several ways. I might tell you that I enjoy bizarre situations. I might say it was part of my plan of vengeance — to take *his*

beautiful wife when he had taken a beautiful woman from me. Or I might say ——"

"That isn't true, is it?" I put in. "About his taking a beautiful woman from you? He never did take a beautiful woman from you?"

"Quite right, he never did. I invented that story to account for my hatred. You understand now that I had a more formidable reason for my hatred. Launay robbed me of something more precious than a thousand beautiful women."

A swift spasm of evil flitted across his face.

"What is the third thing you might say?" I asked, bringing him back to the point.

"If I tell you the third thing, it will bowl you over by its sheer incredibility. But — wait! Are you convinced that I committed this crime?"

"Absolutely."

He threw me an indulgent smile.

"It is very difficult, my dear sir, to affirm anything with absolute knowledge in this world of uncertainties. Allow me to submit two considerations in connection with the theory that I killed Pierre Launay."

I grew impatient here, and assured Bigot that I did not care for this kind of fooling.

"Fooling? I never was more serious in my life. See here. If you are so confident, I'll bet you a

thousand francs that before you leave this room you will acknowledge that I did *not* kill Launay. Come! There's an easy way to make a thousand francs."

"Done!" said I.

"Let me begin by making a general statement. I find myself in a situation of extraordinary exasperatingness. This must account for my peculiar behavior last night. I lost my habitual composure. I might have done you harm, but — fortunately I controlled myself."

I smiled faintly.

"Don't be too incredulous, my young friend. Well, suppose we consider the circumstances of this crime, calmly and dispassionately. We know that the body was found in a taxi-cab at the bottom of the Seine. And the assumption is that the chauffeur, who called himself Jean Pitou, is the murderer?"

"Yes."

"The police have searched high and low for this chauffeur and have never found him?"

"Well?"

Bigot looked at me fixedly.

"You think I am Jean Pitou?"

"I'm sure you are."

"You are right; I am. I drove that taxi-cab into the river, *but I did not kill Pierre Launay*. It will not be difficult for me to make you believe this. The

story I shall tell you carries internal evidence of its verity. By the way, you were not in Paris when the body was found? "

"No."

"You were not present at the inquest? "

"No, but I read the papers."

"You know that the body — I should say the face — had suffered certain disfiguring injuries? It was quite unrecognizable."

"That was the work of the river. A body can't lie at the bottom of the Seine for five or six weeks without — er —— "

"But these injuries were different, there were cuts and bruises. There was one deep gash."

"I didn't read that. If it's true, it only adds to the horror. It shows what fiendish hatred possessed the — the chauffeur."

"Meaning me? "

"You admit you were the chauffeur."

"Yes, and I admit the hatred, but — that injury wasn't done by the chauffeur. It couldn't have been."

"How then? "

"By one of the river-boats — the propeller — understand? Bodies are often picked up that way."

I stared at him to see if he had suddenly taken leave of his reason, or thought that I had.

"But the body was inside the taxi-cab. It never came near the propeller of a boat."

"Then," retorted Bigot, "how do you account for that gash, for the bruises?"

"I only know what the medical experts testified."

His eyes snapped contemptuously.

"Medical experts! Fools!"

"According to them," I persisted, "those injuries were due to the violent impact of the body in falling. That explanation satisfies me. The cuts might have been caused by window-glass."

"Not that one deep cut. And as to your theory that the chauffeur did it — ridiculous! Physically impossible! The whole thing happened in a few seconds. We were hurled down into the river. The chauffeur had to save himself. Don't you newspaper men ever reason things out? Think of the time required. Besides, there are limits to hatred. Why should I injure Launay's body? What was his body to me. I had dealt sufficiently *with his soul!*"

Bigot's eyes blazed on me.

"Then — you say this deep gash was made by the propeller of a boat?" I questioned, more for the sake of driving my enemy into some new absurdity than because I expected any light on the question.

"Undoubtedly."

"In that case will you be kind enough to explain how the body got inside the taxi-cab *after* being hit by the propeller?"

"I certainly will," he answered quietly. "Launay put it there."

I stared at him.

"Launay?"

"Yes. Launay isn't dead. He was not drowned. He came out of the river."

"Pierre Launay isn't dead?" I repeated in a daze of bewilderment.

"I told you I should bowl you over. No! He's alive! A strange case! Here is a man who wanted to die, expected to die — and could not. You see, the taxi-cab turned as it hit the water and Launay was hurled out through the smashed door. As he got the shock of the cold water he struck out instinctively to save himself. Anyone would. I watched him climb up on to the bank, a poor, bedraggled figure."

"My God!"

"I think that settles the question of my being a murderer," Bigot went on amiably. "You owe me a thousand francs."

I studied this extraordinary man, trying to read the truth behind his smiling mask.

"Is this another mystification?"

He shook his head.

"I'll give you proofs, all you want. I'll tell you the whole story of that night by the river. Five hours

I stood there and watched Launay. Have another cigar? "

I took his cigar and smoked it, then smoked another before Bigot had finished his unbelievable recital. Unbelievable, yet I believed it. What convinced me all the more was the fact that he was at no pains to convince me at all. It was a matter of indifference to him whether I thought he was lying, or what I thought. He was telling this story as an artist, to please himself; he didn't care a damn about me.

CHAPTER XXIV

BIGOT'S STORY

"You see now the cause of my agitation last night," Bigot began. "I am accused of murdering a man who is not dead; but if I prove my innocence by establishing that fact, I lose the fortune I have inherited. This money was bequeathed to me by Pierre Launay at his death. Well, Launay is alive."

"Let me get this straight. You intended to kill Launay, but did not succeed; is that it?"

"Yes."

"And you are telling me this story to protect yourself against the charge of murder?"

"That's it. I'm between the devil and the deep sea, as you Americans say."

"Go on. I'm listening."

"All this took place at the left bank of the river," he went on, "near the Carrousel bridge, between midnight and five in the morning. I might write another masterpiece about these five hours, if I were younger and stronger, and — wanted to. During all that time I never spoke to Pierre Launay. I don't think he knew I was watching him. I'm sure he didn't. Had he known, he would have drowned him-

self. The only reason he labored all through that night with the strength and the courage of ten men, was to create incontrovertible evidence that he was dead.

"This idea came to him slowly. I could feel it forming in his mind as he stood there, shivering in his wet clothes, looking out over the dark swirling river. He saw the lights of the bridges, white lights, yellow lights. There, to the left, the lofty beacon of the Eiffel Tower, seen dimly through the fog; and nearer, low-lying, the red lanterns of coal barges grinding against their moorings.

"*Dead, yet alive!*

"I was standing by the stone parapet of the upper roadway, looking down at Launay. My clothes were dry, for I had jumped just before the taxi-cab plunged in. That was not a difficult thing for a man of my activity. All I had to do was to turn the wheel as we reached the bottom of the slope, feed her gas with the hand-control and spring away as she shot forward. I was surprised at the small splash the taxi-cab made as she went under, no noise to speak of, and what there was covered by the sputter of a motor-cycle that came tearing past just then.

"To remain alive after creating incontrovertible evidence that he was dead, that was the conception that had come to Launay as he stood there, bare-

headed, cold, half stunned. As I crept nearer (so that I might watch better and possibly act) I could see his white face, his eyes wild and desperate, then gradually illumined by this new idea. To be alive, yet officially dead! Free from the burden of his shame; with power to create a new existence for himself, to begin over again a clean, humble life, rid of his tainted money, his cursed fame. Alive, with atonement made.

" Thus I read his thoughts, making no mistake. I was surprised to find myself sympathetic, for of course this safe deliverance was a violation of my plans. The explanation was that one artist understands another. Not even hatred could destroy my impartial intellectual interest in this situation. I resolved to let Pierre Launay live, if he could see his way to do so. With the greatest ease I could have prevailed over him in his weakened state and restored to the river its prey; but I decided to give him this chance, if he wished to take it.

" The question was could he accomplish this thing that now occupied his mind. Could he produce incontrovertible evidence that he was dead? How? There must be a body to establish his case. A body! As for clothing and various identifying marks — that was easy. But the body? If I should ever see Pierre Launay again (which I never shall), I would

ask him about this, and I know he would tell me there came a moment, after he had searched vainly among all conceivable possibilities, when he was utterly despairing. There was no way to do this. He must die. He was in a position where he had to die or be ridiculous. There was no other possible or dignified course to pursue, considering what he had said — those uncompromising farewells to his wife, to his friends. . . . And he could not die. He had not been able to die. He was still alive, there on the river-bank with the night fog thickening around him. Alive!

" Suddenly, as if in answer to a call for help, the way was shown to him, the means came to him, was borne to him by the river itself. Even as he gazed out hopelessly, ready to surrender himself once more to the torrent, the aid, the means, the miracle, the *thing* came floating down — a broken, unrecognizable shape that had been a man. Some river-boat with its swift whirling screw had had its way with it; but still it might suffice, and unhesitatingly, Launay leaped out into the flood.

" Fascinated, I watched his struggle with the waters, with the *thing*. Three times I thought he was sinking. Three times he reappeared, dragging his burden. And at last, staggering, dripping, he stumbled up the bank and sank exhausted.

"It was two o'clock. A night-watchman passed along the quay on the upper level. A distant river-boat, making out early, whistled hoarsely. The fog thickened. I could scarcely see ten paces before me. And there lay Launay on the stones.

"I tried to imagine what he would do now. I thought ahead for him. I put myself in his place. I wished him well. I would give him my overcoat, if there were any way to do it. Wait. There was a way. That hulking coal barge with the little skiff floating beside it, held by a length of rope. Launay would need that skiff. He would see it presently and go to it. He *must* go to it, for without the skiff his plan would fail.

"Cautiously through the shadows I made my way to the skiff. It lay between the coal barge and the river-wall, rising and falling gently as the waters gurgled past. It was not more than two feet out from the river-wall. I could almost touch it, so it was a simple matter to roll my overcoat in a bundle, after emptying the pockets, and toss it into the skiff. Launay would find it there. He would put it on and warm himself. I was sure of this.

"When I got back to my post behind the corner of a shanty where river-men keep their tools, Launay had raised himself to his feet and was looking about him. He looked at the coal barge, then down at the

poor *loque humaine* huddled at his feet. His body shivered, but his soul said we must go through with this.

" Again the watchman passed along the quay, and Launay drew nearer to the embankment wall where the gloom was deeper, where he was safe from observation for two hours until the dawn should break. Two hours!

" He caught sight of the skiff, then went to it and studied the situation. His mind worked efficiently. He lay down flat on his stomach and, reaching out, drew the skiff to him. He stepped aboard. He examined the length of the rope. He found the anchor and the anchor-line. Here might be his way of salvation. I was intensely interested.

" Now Launay saw an overcoat lying in the bottom of the boat where some careless owner must have left it. An incredible overcoat! Never was garment more welcome; in fact this was more than a garment, it was an omen, a benediction, a sign that the gods were favoring him. I watched Pierre Launay put on my overcoat, and smiled at the accuracy of my prognostications.

" Of course you see what his plan was, it was perfectly comprehensible now; but to carry it out — Ah! That was something. First, there was the taxicab to be located at the bottom of the Seine. That

meant diving, swimming under water, groping in the darkness, making allowance for the currents."

"You knew in advance that he was going to dive?" I asked in frank admiration.

"Naturally. What else could he do? And sure enough that is what he did, as soon as he had recovered his strength. He plunged into the river at a point about thirty feet above where the taxi-cab lay, taking off his shoes and coat, and of course the overcoat. He dived three times before he succeeded. Each time he stayed under nearly a minute."

"A strong swimmer indeed he must be."

"Not at all. It was the power of his purpose. He did the thing that had to be done. *You* could have done it. Well, after the third dive he was satisfied that he knew where the taxi-cab lay. He must have touched it with his groping hands, down at the bottom of the river. I call that courage, Mr. Esterbrooke.

"I watched him draw two lines on the ground that gave him his bearings by landmarks on the opposite bank, like a surveyor. Then came the hardest thing — two things. I don't know which was the harder. Poor weak mortals! How we cling to life! Well, the first thing was ——"

"I know — the evidence. Don't tell me about that."

"You understand he had to *change* everything — strip off, put on. . . . It took him half an hour. Twice he nearly fainted, especially when ——"

"Don't go into that."

"Squeamish, eh? Well, at last everything was ready, the *evidence* was complete; then came the struggle to get this wretchd make-up of Pierre Launay, this pitiful masquerade of the river down into the taxi-cab. I have never seen such fortitude, such resourcefulness. It was magnificent. I would have helped him, had I dared. As a matter of fact I did help him. If you ever see Pierre Launay, as you probably will, tell him his effort would have failed if it hadn't been for Bigot. Now then, pay attention to this. It's a dramatic bit.

"A little after three, the watchman came along again just as Launay was unfastening the skiff. Unfortunately he kicked against one of the oars and it fell off the seat with a fearsome racket. You know how small sounds are magnified in the night. The watchman called. 'Who is there?' And Launay kept silent, but you may be sure his heart was beating. The watchman called again — he knew there were river-thieves about — and I could hear his footsteps hastening. There was only one thing to do, and I did it, risking my own safety — tell Launay that. I came back up the steep incline as quickly as I could,

walking on my toes so as to make no sound. And just as I reached the street level I met the watchman.

" ' What in the devil are you doing here? ' he demanded.

" Fortunately I had had presence of mind enough to take off my cap and pretended to be brushing some mud from it.

" ' My cap fell over the parapet and I went down after it,' I explained. ' Had a little too much to drink at a banquet.' This, with a two-franc piece that I offered him to get something warm for himself, satisfied the guardian of the night that I was a perfect gentleman, and he marched on.

" When I got back to the shanty I made out the skiff dimly — so thick was the fog hanging over the water — about ten yards from shore, apparently anchored. Launay seemed to be kneeling in the bottom of the boat, busy with something important, the nature of which I could guess. He was working earnestly, and presently I heard a splash and saw that Pierre Launay was now at the stern, which was headed down-stream, manipulating a rope, paying it out foot by foot with elaborate care. Now he made fast the end of the rope, then standing erect, peered into the darkness as one who estimates distances and forces. Finally, using the utmost caution, he let himself slide gently (rather than dive) into the river.

My nerves are usually strong enough, but I acknowledge I was a bit upset as the waters covered him, and I thought of the grim task he was trying to perform down below.

" For forty-five seconds he was gone (I timed it by my pulse-beats, for it was too dark to see my watch), and when Launay reappeared at the stern he hung there panting. He must have used the rope dragging behind to guide him back to the skiff. I gathered that the *evidence* was at the lower end of this rope, noosed securely, probably weighted with the skiff-anchor so that it was held some yards beneath the surface, near the taxi-cab.

" Evidently his first effort failed, for after a rest he dived again, kicking off from the boat and following the guide-rope downward. His task was to maneuver the *evidence* inside the taxi-cab, then cut the sustaining noose, then get rid of the weight, then get himself out of the taxi-cab through the smashed window and rise to the surface before his breath failed, say, within a minute at the longest. No athlete can do heavy work at the bottom of a river for more than one minute. And Launay was not an athlete.

" Nevertheless he did this. Not at the second trial, nor the third. Three times he failed, coming up each time at the stern to pant for air, then resolutely going

down again. The fourth time I thought he must be drowned, he stayed below so long. A minute and a half by my heart-beats, but they may have quickened under the strain. At his fourth reappearance he clung to the stern-rope utterly exhausted. At last he had succeeded. The thing was done.

"You may say this is impossible; I tell you he did it. It is impossible for a mother to go into a burning building to save her child, but she will do it. It is impossible for a Russian peasant to walk from Moscow to Jerusalem and go the last ten miles to the Holy Sepulchre on his knees, but he will do it. It was impossible for that poor devil of a hero in Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* to get a great vessel off the rocks single-handed, but he did it. My young friend, nothing is impossible when the human soul is roused to put forth its loftiest powers. There are supreme moments when man becomes like God. You may think me a queer person to say all this, but I am speaking as an artist, and art, my dear Esterbrooke, has nothing to do with individual morality.

"At any rate Launay succeeded. The evidence was properly placed inside the taxi-cab, but he was too weak to climb into the boat. He was almost too weak to cling to the rope. He waited . . . hanging pitifully with his head just above the water; then, after a long delay he swam ashore and lay down on the

stones. He lay there half an hour, and I — *I envied him!*

"At a few minutes after four o'clock, Launay roused himself as the long discordant scream of a fruit and vegetable train, coming into the *gare d'Orsay,* cut through the night. He struggled to his feet, looked about him dizzily, then remembered. He had one more duty to perform — the skiff anchored there in the stream. He must swim out once more and paddle her back to her moorings. One final effort.

"So it happened. The skiff was brought to her place beside the coal barge with everything intact except part of the rope, the part that had made the noose. This, together with the anchor, had been cut off and allowed to float down the river.

"When the last detail had been attended to, Launay climbed aboard the coal barge and stowed himself away in the darkest corner of the empty hold. His head was splitting with pain. His body was racked with chills, burning with fever. You ask how I know all this? I tell you I know it. He covered himself with my overcoat and slept for twenty-four hours. When he came to his senses he was miles away, for shortly after sunrise the coal barge pulled out into the river, making for the sea."

CHAPTER XXV

BIGOT SPRINGS A SURPRISE

I CAN offer no better proof of the power and convincingness of Bigot's story than the fact that when he had finished, I handed over the thousand francs of our wager without a word of protest; and in spite of Blanche Launay's telephone message that the murderer had been found. I did not believe this; there must be some mistake. I was satisfied Bigot's words were true. If they weren't true the story was worth a week's salary anyway, just as a story.

But my amiable friend waved aside the banknotes.

" No, no, my boy. Keep your money. You don't make yours quite so easily as I do. Please."

I insisted, however, and he finally let me pay him.

" How can you be sure I'm not lying? " he grinned at me. " You say I have a vivid imagination. That's true. Perhaps Launay never did any of those things in the river that I described so realistically. Perhaps he really is dead. Remember the Chinese princess."

I looked him over good-naturedly.

" Bigot," I said, " by your own admission you're a crook and a scoundrel and possibly a murderer, but there are things about you I like, and I'm going to

take a chance on you this once. I believe you're on the level in this thing. I'm going straight off to Madame Launay's lawyer and tell him what we've agreed upon."

"Namely — just recapitulate, please."

"You are to give back a million francs to Madame Launay?"

"Right."

"You promise never to have anything more to do with her, never to try to see her?"

"I promise."

"You promise never to reveal the authorship of *Le Cœur d'un Enfant?*"

"*Entendu.*"

"And you will let us have some kind of a written statement guaranteeing the fulfilment of these pledges. It must be something in the nature of a confession."

Bigot frowned.

"Suppose we discuss that with Madame Launay's lawyer?"

"If you like. But I insist upon some guarantee. Let's see." I glanced at my watch. "Two o'clock. I'll call here late this afternoon with the lawyer — say at half-past five. You can arrange to turn the money over to him. Is that agreeable to you?"

"My dear boy," laughed Emile Bigot, "it's never

agreeable to give up a million francs; but I'll do it. Bring on your lawyer."

I studied him keenly as he lighted a cigarette.

"You may be trying to put something over," I mused, "but — remember, this hotel is guarded, your movements are watched."

"I know." I caught a flash of good-natured mockery in his glance. "Bye-bye, Esterbrooke — until half-past five."

I now decided to call on Blanche Launay before seeing the lawyer. I felt that I must know what ground that detective had for his incomprehensible report. The murderer discovered? Impossible.

I found the lady in a great state of nerves.

"Alan, I've been waiting for you all the morning," she said reproachfully. "It's after two. You don't seem to realize the importance of this."

I explained that I had been unavoidably detained.

"You can judge for yourself," she went on. "Here it is — the telegram." She handed me one of the little squares of flimsy blue paper upon which in scraggly handwriting matters of life and death importance are transmitted by the French government.

And I read: "*Man located. Clear case against him. Only await your instructions to make arrest. Brousse.*"

"Brousse is the name of the detective," she added.

"Where did you pick him up?" I questioned, not being particularly impressed, as I knew that Paris abounds in cheap swindlers who call themselves detectives.

"I got him from one of the best agencies — they have offices on the Avenue de l'Opera."

"That doesn't prove anything. Who recommended them?"

Madame Launay bit her lip.

"I read their advertisement in the *Figaro* — that's a serious newspaper. Besides, what difference does it make where I got him? He has done his work. You see what he says."

"Important — if true," I commented, quoting the favorite phrase of my city editor.

"It's ridiculous of you, Alan, to be so skeptical. Why should the man send such a telegram if it weren't true? He wouldn't dare."

"One would think so," I admitted, "but ——"

I stopped short, realizing that I could not reveal my reasons for feeling that M. Brousse had made a mistake. I could not shock Madame Launay by announcing that her husband was alive and that consequently there was no murderer to arrest. After all I had only Bigot's word for it, and the fact that I happened to believe him in this instance proved nothing. Perhaps he *did* invent that river episode.

"But what?"

"He ought to have given details. You can't spring a thing like that out of a clear sky," I argued in a weak effort to justify myself. "A detective who knows his business makes regular reports. This man is evidently a *fakir* — pulling your leg. Excuse me, that's American slang."

"You're absurd, Alan. He's not a *fakir*. He has made reports — every few days. He has done some clever work — followed all sorts of clues. I'll have him tell you everything. You'll see how mistaken you are."

She spoke so positively that I began to feel misgivings.

"Of course I may be wrong. Where is this detective?"

"In Honfleur — waiting for me. I telegraphed him I would take the first train, and I told him to do nothing until I arrived. I want you to go with me, Alan."

"When? — not to-day." I objected, remembering my appointment with Bigot and the interview I must have with the lawyer.

"We *must* go to-day," she insisted. "There isn't a moment to lose. There's a train at 4.20 from the St. Lazare station."

"I can't possibly take that one," I told her. "I've

got to report at the office and — er — there are two or three other things ——"

Tapping her foot excitedly the lady consulted the *indicateur* and found that the next train left at 6.47 from the same station.

"All right, I'll meet you there at 6.47, if I can possibly make it," I promised. "There's an urgent matter ——"

"You must meet me, Alan," she insisted, half-pleadingly, and so we left it.

I spent the next two hours at the office attending to belated work that simply had to be made up, then I drove to the Hôtel Ritz, with the intention of telling Emile Bigot that I should not be able to see him for another twenty-four hours as I had been called suddenly out of town; but here a surprise was in store for me.

Emile Bigot was gone. He had vanished, disappeared, left for parts unknown, in spite of the vigilant eyes of three capable and reliable men who had been assigned to guard the hotel. How he managed this is a mystery that was not solved until much later. Sufficient to say the men made no blunder in their watchfulness, nor did they connive at Bigot's evasion. No one could have managed the surveillance better than they did. And yet Bigot escaped.

While I was turning this over in chagrin, and curs-

ing myself as an overtrusting fool, I was surprised to find myself greeted deferentially by no less a person than the hotel manager, a brisk and pompous person, expensively tailored, who begged me to do him the honor to enter his private office. This honor I did him with as much dignity as I could assume, and was still more astonished when he presently opened a formidable safe and drew forth a sealed envelope addressed to me.

"You are without any question M. Alan Esterbrooke?"

"Without any question," I assured him, and at his polite suggestion I produced various credentials establishing my identity.

"*Voilà,* Monsieur," The manager bowed ceremoniously and handed me the paper. "I am requested by M. Bigot to give you this in person."

"Thanks. Do you happen to know where M. Bigot has gone?"

"I have no idea. He sent for me an hour ago and entrusted me with this. It is exceedingly important. He begged me to have you open it in my presence, so that I can testify to the contents, if necessary."

"All right," I agreed, and slitting the length with my pen-knife, I came upon a long letter from Emile Bigot inside of which was folded a purple cheque, duly certified by the Crédit Lyonnais Bank, for one

million francs payable to the order of Blanche Launay.

"By George! What do you know about that?" I marveled, while the manager, with hands outspread, bowed low in admiration of this pleasing sum.

Bigot's letter, written in a fine, distinguished hand, was as follows:

"'My Dear Alan Esterbrooke,—

'I had to do this. There was no other way. Sometime, if I ever see you again, I may tell you why, also *how*, which latter is an interesting bit. My compliments to your three friends who were supposed to hold me under their kind guardianship. Do not blame them. If there had been twenty I should have gone just the same. There are new things in the world.

'I hope this action of mine will not make you lose faith in me, or doubt the story I told you about the river. That is true, every word of it. I could not imagine anything so full of poignant thrills. Pierre Launay is alive, no matter what anyone may tell you to the contrary. Alive and at peace with his own soul for the first time in many years, you may be sure. He is a poor fisherman in the little village by the sea not far from Honfleur. He goes by the name of Max Renoux. I need not tell you how I know these things.

'I am giving you this information to justify my-

self, but I beg you, for the sake of a soul that has been lifted out of hell, to guard this secret, to reveal it to no one, least of all to Madame Launay. To her and to all the world Pierre Launay is dead and must remain so. To betray him is to destroy him. Remember, I have warned you.

'I realize, my dear Alan, that however much I may insist upon the truth of these statements, you will be torn by doubts. You will say to yourself, "Yes, that's all very well, but Bigot is such a liar. He has fooled me so often, how can I believe him now? Launay may be dead after all. That yarn about a man burying himself at the bottom of a river — fantastic! All that diving . . . diving . . . in the night. Most improbable! And then the coming along of that body so damned conveniently! No, no! I can't swallow it. Launay *is* dead. Bigot *is* a murderer!"

'That is what you may think when you come to consider the whole affair in the cold light of reason without my powerful personality and plausible gift of gab to sway you.

'Well, my boy, in that event I want to arrange matters so that you will be under no further embarrassment. I want you to feel absolutely safe and easy in your mind, whether Launay is alive or dead. I am going to be more than fair to you; I am going to be generous to this extent, that, whatever happens

you will always hold me in your power and be able to impose your will upon me, if I should at any time try to make trouble.

'I therefore enclose, duly witnessed, a formal and unqualified confession of my guilt as regards Pierre Launay, which confession will deliver me into the hands of the authorities or make me a fugitive from justice at any moment that you may see fit to use it. I trust entirely, my dear Esterbrooke, to your good sportsmanship and sense of fairness not to use this document or show it to anyone, unless you consider it absolutely necessary to do so.

'Finally, I promise on my honor that I will never seek to see Madame Launay, nor reveal the authorship of a certain book; and as an indication that the word *honor* still means something to me I enclose my cheque for one million francs, the amount agreed upon, and beg you to present this to Madame Launay, with the assurance of my distinguished consideration.

'Good luck, my talented young friend. It has been a pleasure to know you.

'EMILE BIGOT.'"

I did not see Emile Bigot again for many months.

CHAPTER XXVI

HESITATIONS

I DROVE quickly to the lawyer's office and left the precious cheque, together with a hurried and confused explanation (I said nothing of the possibility that Launay might be alive), and begged my legal friend to find some plausible reason why Madame Launay must not go to Honfleur. It was evidently necessary to spare her the shock of meeting her husband in the flesh when she was expecting to find his murderer.

"You absolutely must keep her back," I assured him. "I can't tell you why now, but it's terribly important. You can think of something, can't you? It might be something connected with the cheque, mightn't it?"

"That might do," he agreed. "She must deposit the cheque in her bank without a moment's delay, and as to-day is Saturday ——"

"That won't do," I interrupted. "There must be a longer delay — three or four days' delay, until I get back from Honfleur, see?"

The lawyer pondered this, then promised to find some technical reason for keeping Madame Launay

in Paris, and with this assurance I dashed on to the Gare St. Lazare where the lady was impatiently waiting.

With the greatest difficulty I persuaded Blanche Launay that she must not go to Honfleur, but must let me make the journey in her stead and act for her; the reason I gave was that I had just seen her lawyer and he required her presence without an instant's delay in connection with an important business matter.

" He says he has wonderful news for you, Madame. There's a chance of your getting a lot of money," I said, astutely withholding the details and stirring the lady's curiosity.

" Really? "

" Yes, it's something like a million francs, I think. It isn't absolutely sure yet; there are details to be attended to, or the thing may slip up."

" A million francs! " she repeated in amazement. " But how? "

" He'll tell you all about it. Just scribble a few lines for me on a card that I can show to Brousse. I'll wire you what the situation is. Perhaps it won't be necessary for you to come down at all. I understand your wishes and you can trust me to act for you. I must ask you to decide at once, or I shall miss my train."

So I managed it, and had the satisfaction of seeing

the much perplexed lady roll away to the lawyer's office; but I did not take the train in question, for even as I talked to Blanche Launay, I had decided to take a later one at 8.10. I needed time to reflect quietly and not allow myself to be stampeded into any precipitate action. It was also a question whether I ought to acquaint Marguerite with these developments before my departure; but I finally decided not to do this, owing to lack of time; I would wire my sweetheart from Honfleur.

As I look back at this hour I recall that my intuitions remained strong for the theory that Launay *was* alive, that Bigot, for once in his life, had told the truth. And I still felt a sneaking fondness for this fascinating scoundrel. I was almost ready to forgive him the lies he had told me, and trouble he had caused me.

And yet ——

I took out Bigot's letter and read it over again carefully, also the enclosed confession, written on a separate sheet with various self-satisfied flourishes, and witnessed by the hotel manager. Fancy that! The manager must have signed without reading the words:

" I, Emile Bigot, being of sound mind and desiring to clear up various difficulties and anxieties, voluntarily confess that I was the driver (known as Jean Pitou) of the taxi-cab in which Pierre Launay met

his death in the River Seine on the night of January 19, 1924, and that I alone am responsible for this assassination, both in the planning and the execution.

" (*Signed*) EMILE BIGOT."

Was there ever such sinister effrontery? Launay was *not* dead; but if it pleased us to assume that he *was* dead, then Bigot admitted the killing. What an accommodating murderer!

Well, at any rate, I had saved Blanche Launay from Bigot's importunities. He would never trouble her again. And he had made restitution of a million francs. That was something. He might have carried the money off with him. Why didn't he? Was there a certain amount of decency in him after all? Or was it fear, when he found himself cornered?

But he wasn't cornered. He had been able to escape in spite of the watch I had set about his apartment. How in the world had he managed that, outwitting those keen chaps I had secured from the Paris police department? A clever man, Bigot! In spite of everything I liked him. You couldn't help liking him, murderer or not. But *was* he a murderer? Or only a bewildering liar? This was still the question that emerged insistently from all my puzzling — *Was Pierre Launay alive?*

CHAPTER XXVII

MAX RENOUX

I TOOK the 8.10 train for Honfleur, after spending two meditative hours wandering about, sitting down in a café, getting a bite of supper in the big dining-room of the Rue Montesquieu Duval establishment, with its overhanging galleries that always remind me of the saloon in one of our Long Island Sound steamers. What an extraordinary situation I was facing! Journeying to a place where I should either meet a man supposed to be dead, but not dead; or else, if he really were dead, where I should meet and perhaps arrest his murderer. What a fiction story this would make.

My newspaper instincts kept me tingling with excitement as my train flew along. Assuming Bigot's statement to be true, what was my next step to be? What should I say to Pierre Launay when I came face to face with him? And what would he say to me, this despairing man who had sacrificed everything to guard his incognito, to prepare a new existence for himself? I would find him changed, dressed in the rough clothes of a fisherman, bronzed by his open-air life, stronger. He would probably wear a

beard. But I should know him, and he would know me. Well, then what? It would be like talking to a ghost.

Perhaps I had better not talk to him at all. There was really nothing to say. Nothing that I could say! Nothing that he could say! His decision was irrevocable. In his place I would have done the same. There are certain things that the human soul cannot bear, and one of these is the stigma of openly known, personally admitted dishonor. If the secrets of the confessional were told in the market-place, I suppose half of us poor mortals would have to kill ourselves. Perhaps the only thing for me to do, was to verify my conviction that Launay was alive — see him without speaking to him — and go back to Paris.

But Brousse! This astute individual from the Avenue de l'Opera detective agency who had located the murderer of a man who was alive — what about Brousse? I must first hear what he had to say, examine the evidence that had led him into this singular error, and then explain to him that his services were no longer needed. I might have to take him into my confidence, tell him the truth, that there had been no murder at all, and swear him to secrecy. Perhaps pay him to hold his tongue. Perhaps appeal to his heart, to his sense of decency, if he had any.

M. Brousse met me at the Honfleur station (in response to a telegram sent from the train) — a care-worn, rusty little man with a sallow skin, iron-grey hair and a suspiciously black moustache — and at once he revealed the fact that there had been an annoying development.

" It's nothing serious, Monsieur," he assured me in a mysterious whisper, " but this — this person I have been shadowing has gone away over Sunday."

" Gone away? "

" He'll be back Monday morning, there's no doubt about that. He's a most reliable fellow; all the neighbors say so."

" Murderers generally are," said I.

But Brousse went on unruffled:

" He has a job helping a boat-builder in Vasouy. He does odds and ends of work — anything he can pick up, mending nets, patching sails. Sometimes he works in the fields. The people about here like him. You see how clever he is, building up a character for himself. It's a peculiar case. When we get to the hotel I'll show you my evidence. Shall we walk? It's not far."

I was glad to walk, feeling myself cramped after the journey; so giving my bag to a porter, I proceeded to stroll through the picturesque streets of

this old Norman town with Brousse at my side. It was moonlight — a mild night in early spring; but my mind was not on the beauties of nature.

"How old a man is this murderer?" I asked my companion.

"About fifty."

"Fairly tall, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Wears a beard — black, streaked with grey?"

"*C'est ça.*"

"And he goes by the name of Max Renoux?"

Brousse stared at me in amazement.

"How did you know that, Monsieur?"

"I'll tell you later. He escaped from Paris in a coal barge, didn't he?" I went on. "Wore clothes that didn't belong to him? I suppose you made something out of that cut rope-end, too, if you got hold of Max Renoux's knife."

This, I should explain, was a shrewd guess, but it hit the mark.

"Most astonishing, Monsieur," exclaimed the little man, aghast at my uncanny knowledge. "You are entirely correct. A microscopic examination of the blade and the rope-end shows an exact identity of tiny notches."

"Very scientific, up-to-date," I nodded, "and all tending to show that Max Renoux was present at the scene of the murder, but ——"

" There is no doubt about it, Monsieur. It was he who cut the rope. It was he who hid in the coal barge."

" Precisely, but it wasn't he who killed Pierre Launay."

" *Mais oui,* Monsieur."

" *Mais non.*"

I turned to the astonished detective and said with quite an air of authority: " Don't trouble to give me any more evidence, Monsieur Brousse. Just go ahead over Sunday and locate your murderer. Then meet me Monday morning at nine o'clock and I may be able to enlighten you about several things. Don't be disturbed. It's all right. I want a day of rest anyway."

Brousse bowed deferentially in acquiescence, there being nothing else for him to do.

" Until Monday, Monsieur," he murmured.

" Until Monday," I bowed.

I slept soundly at the famous " Three Guardsmen Inn," renowned for its many delights among Normandy sight-seers; and in the morning I breakfasted late in the fascinating courtyard, with its venerable vine-covered walls and bosquets spread about with fragrant blooms.

" A fine day," I remarked to the trim maid who served me.

She lifted her shapely shoulders, tipped back the

quaint Norman head-dress that the women wear, and looked up doubtfully at the heavens; then informed me that they were all praying against a threatening storm.

" If it will only hold off until the procession is over, Monsieur," she said.

She went on to explain that this was the most important Sunday in the whole year in Honfleur. This was the Fête Dieu. There was to be a procession from the old church with all the girls in white dresses and all the children carrying bouquets and the archbishop of the diocese who had come from a distance to add the dignity of his illustrious presence. So it would be the worst kind of a pity if the storm should come too soon. Personally I could see no sign of bad weather, but I knew that these fisher-folk had true instincts in these matters.

" I'll pray, too, that the storm doesn't come," I volunteered, and received a coquettish smile.

I learned that the procession did not start until four, and spent the time until then in a long stroll along the cliffs, whence one gains a view of the wide bay, dotted with sail boats (the bay into which the Seine discharges) and of the ocean beyond. I noticed many lighthouses at dangerous points along the coast, and thought of these later. As I retraced my steps I caught the sweep of a rising wind and saw

that it was going to be jolly rough on the channel shortly. They had better get busy with their procession.

To tell the truth there was nothing particularly imposing about this ancient ceremonial, although the whole town turned out to see it. To me there has always been something ridiculous (I suppose it is my Presbyterian inheritance) in the sight of men with red necks and ample stomachs parading around in white lace garments that reach to their heels (you glimpse the heavy boots underneath), with red and gold embroideries hung over their backs and red and gold canopies borne above them. I don't mind the boys in their white lace dresses and red capes, the incense-swingers, who march in front — they are nice little fellows with chubby faces; and I love the long lines of children carrying flowers and strewing them along the way. On the whole I suppose it's all right, if that is what the people want and believe in. Still . . . I thought of the old Norman spinning wheels, the foolish old battle-axes, the slave galleys loaded with niggers that used to put forth from these ports, the dungeons where prisoners were held by chains riveted to moldering walls, and slept on filthy straw. It all seemed part of the past.

As I watched the pageant with such thoughts and with a half-sad regret that I could not make it mean

more to myself, I was conscious of the figure of a man poorly clad, who stepped aside from a group following close behind the archbishop and the sacred host, to help a boy of scarcely three who was toddling along bearing a bouquet of flowers almost as big as himself, and who had stumbled and fallen. The man set him on his feet with some comforting words, and the little fellow marched on bravely.

There was something vaguely familiar in this figure, and I pressed nearer as the man resumed his place in the procession. Although his back was turned I felt the reverence of his attitude, the sincerity of his devotion. Here was a man, I reflected, finding comfort in his humble lot, solace for his sorrows. His eyes were held by the crucifix, his thoughts centered upon the beautiful and eternal truths behind a more or less tawdry symbolism. Perhaps this man, this fisherman, carpenter, worker in the fields or whatever he was, could never be reached by the cold black-coated formalities of the Presbyterian faith.

I quickened my steps so that I might look this man in the face, passing the venerable archbishop and the four canopy-bearers, passing the high-held golden star that carries the hostie, passing the incense-swingers, and I saw . . . Pierre Launay!

It was true. He was alive. And he had found peace in his own soul. That was evident. Balm for his

troubled conscience. Through humility and faith — the ancient way.

I looked at him, marveling, and at that moment he turned and saw me — I am sure he saw me, although he gave no sign. The next instant his eyes were back upon the cross, eyes that shone with the same inexpressible beauty and tenderness that saints and martyrs have, eyes that held you with their poignant sadness: I shall never forget his eyes.

And now suddenly, with a blast from the sea, the rain came down in torrents and there was a scurrying of the crowd for shelter. But the procession did not pause. The trumpeters still sounded their trumpets, the drummers rolled their call. The little boys still swung their incense-cups before the archbishop. But the girls in their white dresses and long white veils showed themselves less heroic, and many of them broke ranks for the nearest doorway.

For some minutes I gave assistance in this distressed stampede, and when I returned to the point where I had seen Pierre Launay — he was gone.

I never saw Pierre Launay again, nor tried to see him, for I had been profoundly impressed by those ominous words of Emile Bigot: *"Remember if you go to him you will destroy him."*

No. I must leave things as they were, nor presume

to break in upon this humble, yet sublime plan of atonement. And Blanche Launay must never know the truth — I must take that responsibility. No one must ever know — no one except my sweetheart, and perhaps not even she.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER A YEAR

Of course I told Marguerite, but not immediately; it was nearly a year after our marriage before she knew everything. (Let it be recorded now that there never has been anything quite as successful as this marriage, which took place, exactly as we had planned it, among the flowers of Normandy.) In my great happiness I could not bear the thought of hiding anything from my darling. So one balmy spring night, as we strolled on the Champ Elysées very late, I took her into my confidence — talked for hours about the Launay mystery, explaining every phase of it. And her questions made me realize how many disconnected ends there were in my narrative.

" Poor man! " she murmured, as it all became clear to her. " To think of Pierre Launay casting his lot in that fisherman's village where the coal barge brought him, doing whatever work came to hand, no matter how menial. It's wonderful."

" Yes, dear. He's letting his light shine in the old way — kindness, service, humility."

" But Madame Launay? I don't see how you can keep it from her that her husband is alive."

Once more I went over my reasons, developing

them at length; but Marguerite's knitted brows, her troubled silence, showed that she disagreed.

"But she thinks herself a widow."

"Yes."

"She's attractive, rich ——"

"I know."

"Suppose she should plan to marry again? Don't you see? It isn't fair."

"I've thought of that, but — I don't see how I can tell her."

"You surely wouldn't let her marry again — innocently?"

"She never will want to marry again; she has told me so. She's giving herself up to good works."

Still Marguerite was not satisfied.

"But suppose she should, Alan? You can't be sure about a woman. Besides, she may discover the truth accidentally. Brousse might tell her — that queer little detective. He must know?"

"Yes, he knows, I had to tell him; he's the only one who does know, except you and me. But he'll never open his mouth. Brousse isn't a bad fellow — a lot of religious feeling. His heart was touched when I gave him the facts. Furthermore, I guaranteed him double pay in return for his promise of silence. 'Never a word out of me,' he solemnly vowed. It would hurt my professional reputation."

"Let's think a little, dear," Marguerite whispered, and for a long time we did not speak, sitting in those lovely, shadowy gardens under fresh-blooming marroniers, looking out upon this most splendid avenue in the world, so strangely impressive now in its quiet night aspect.

Marguerite lighted a cigarette.

"Alan! There's another thing," she broke in presently upon our meditations, "I don't understand about that dark corridor — that hand on the door?"

Again I explained that the man I had struggled with at the antechamber door was Pierre Launay himself, who had heard a stifled sneeze in the next room, just as I had, and had excused himself to his guests the moment after I went out. He had graver reasons than I for wishing to know exactly who this eavesdropper was, although he must have been sure it was Emile Bigot.

"And it *was* Bigot?"

"It certainly was. He had stolen in from his taxicab to listen."

"And the hand? Was it Launay's finger that was scarred? I should never have guessed that."

"Of course it was. He did it as a boy with a jigsaw. Madame Launay told me. She doesn't know what caused the blue marks."

Again Marguerite was silent.

"And it was Pierre Launay who went to Notre-Dame that morning for the letter addressed to me?"

"Of course; but he didn't go *for* the letter, he came *with* it."

"How do you mean came *with* it?"

"It was then that he left the letter on top of the confessional box — tossed it up there. He wasn't looking for it; he was leaving it. You understand this was the letter he spoke to me about, the one he wrote to you before he disappeared and never had the courage to deliver."

"And you think he wanted me to get this letter now? To read it? Do you, dear? If he did, why didn't he mark out that inscription?"

This was rather a puzzler.

"He wanted you to read it, and he didn't, that's the way I figure it out. He was still ashamed to have the truth known, and yet he wanted to protect his wife from Bigot. It was a compromise with his conscience."

"But — the cut on his nose? The cut that the sacristan saw? How do you account for that?"

"Grease-paint, my dear, I expect. You see he had to disguise himself. He was supposed to be dead. He couldn't take chances on being recognized."

"It seems so strange. You say Pierre Launay wanted to protect his wife against Bigot, but how

did he know she needed protection? How could he imagine such a thing? "

"He didn't imagine it. I have an idea that he watched over her — came to the city from time to time. We know he drove in on a vegetable cart that day when he went to Notre-Dame. There was a period when he left Honfleur and was employed by a farmer near Paris — Brousse told me this. It may have been his job to drive in every night. That was safe enough — those vegetable carts don't arrive until two or three in the morning. Well, why did Pierre Launay take such a job? It's clear enough, isn't it? No doubt he longed for a glimpse of familiar scenes, but that wasn't all."

"I understand," sighed Marguerite. "He longed for a glimpse of his home. It's the saddest thing I ever heard of. Oh, *mon chère,* can't you see that lonely man with his great clumping horse, driving along through the sleeping city . . . thinking of his wife? Perhaps drawing up outside her window? Perhaps seeing her with Bigot? Alan! he loved her. He loves her still — I'm sure he does."

"Yes, but he never could live with her. That's the terrible part of it. Think! Could you live with — with a man if he had done a thing like that? Could you? "

The dear girl caught my arm impulsively and drew me close to her.

" I would never leave you, no matter what you had done, if you wanted me, if you loved me," she said tenderly.

" Ah! That's the tragedy. Pierre Launay loves his wife, but he would sooner die than look into her eyes. Listen, Margie! I didn't mean to tell you this, but I may as well. It was *after* he saw me that day of the procession that Launay left the fishing village and went to work on a farm. As soon as he knew I had recognized him he disappeared — he simply had to. I suppose I could find him now — I know I could — but it would be a crime. A man knows how another man would feel."

In reply to which, speaking very softly, Marguerite said: " And a woman knows how another woman would feel. We have a duty of forgiveness toward others, dear; but haven't we also a duty to receive the forgiveness offered us by others? It isn't enough to love. We must be willing to *be* loved. Suppose the prodigal son had refused to accept the feast that was prepared for him? "

Against these admirable but too idealistic words I went over my arguments again, speaking as a writing man, showing my generous little wife that this thing she wanted was simply impossible. Pierre Launay could never endure such a resurrection of dishonor. He would perish, and his beautiful Christ-like effort would be cut short.

" But that's not Christ-like, it's wicked, sinful pride," she declared. " Tell me, why did you say you could find Pierre Launay, if you wished to? "

I hesitated, but finally she got the truth out of me.

" Because I saw him once — I'm sure I did — late one night, about two months ago. He was driving a dark blue cart with a white star on it — that must be a brand of vegetable produce. Was I startled? I'll say I was. What a change since our last meeting in Paris! Not only the beard and the broadened shoulders, but especially the eyes shining with quiet power — somehow you felt great forces of the soul there."

" A dark blue cart with a white star on it," my little girl repeated thoughtfully. " Did he see you? "

" No! His gaze was fixed straight ahead, dreamily. His cap was pushed back. The cart was just crossing the Place de la Concorde, moving slowly toward the bridge."

" The bridge! " Marguerite shivered. " What time was it? "

" About this time — nearly three o'clock. Darling, we must be going home."

Her eyes roved wistfully up the broad Avenue toward the Arc de Triomphe, from which direction the high-wheeled vegetable carts that feed the metropolis were already beginning to arrive, each guided by a crouching, crumpled-up figure in blouse

and cap, slumped forward sleepily in the shadows of a hooded seat. And I knew what she was thinking.

"Marguerite!"

"Yes, dear."

"You wouldn't do anything about this without telling me?"

"Of course not."

"Nothing without my consent?"

She answered slowly: "No, dear, but — you will give your consent some day."

"My consent to tell Blanche Launay?"

She nodded.

"You will, because it's right, inevitable."

"No!"

My wife looked up at me with her bright, adorable smile.

"*Nous verrons, chéri! Voilà!* Now let's go home."

THE END.

"The Books You Like to Read
at the Price You Like to Pay"

There Are Two Sides to Everything—

—including the wrapper which covers every Grosset & Dunlap book. When you feel in the mood for a good romance, refer to the carefully selected list of modern fiction comprising most of the successes by prominent writers of the day which is printed on the back of every Grosset & Dunlap book wrapper.

You will find more than five hundred titles to choose from—books for every mood and every taste and every pocketbook.

Don't forget the other side, but in case the wrapper is lost, write to the publishers for a complete catalog.

There is a Grosset & Dunlap Book
for every mood and for every taste

EMERSON HOUGH'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list

THE COVERED WAGON

NORTH OF 36

THE WAY OF A MAN

THE STORY OF THE OUTLAW

THE SAGEBRUSHER

THE GIRL AT THE HALFWAY HOUSE

THE WAY OUT

THE MAN NEXT DOOR

THE MAGNIFICENT ADVENTURE

THE BROKEN GATE

THE STORY OF THE COWBOY

THE WAY TO THE WEST

54-40 OR FIGHT

HEART'S DESIRE

THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE

THE PURCHASE PRICE

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

GEORGE W. OGDEN'S WESTERN NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

THE BARON OF DIAMOND TAIL

The Elk Mountain Cattle Co. had not paid a dividend in years; so Edgar Barrett, fresh from the navy, was sent West to see what was wrong at the ranch. The tale of this tenderfoot outwitting the buckaroos at their own play will sweep you into the action of this salient western novel.

THE BONDBOY

Joe Newbolt, bound out by force of family conditions to work for a number of years, is accused of murder and circumstances are against him. His mouth is sealed; he cannot, as a gentleman, utter the words that would clear him. A dramatic, romantic tale of intense interest.

CLAIM NUMBER ONE

Dr. Warren Slavens drew claim number one, which entitled him to first choice of rich lands on an Indian reservation in Wyoming. It meant a fortune; but before he established his ownership he had a hard battle with crooks and politicians.

THE DUKE OF CHIMNEY BUTTE

When Jerry Lambert, "the Duke," attempts to safeguard the cattle ranch of Vesta Philbrook from thieving neighbors, his work is appallingly handicapped because of Grace Kerr, one of the chief agitators, and a deadly enemy of Vesta's. A stirring tale of brave deeds, gun-play and a love that shines above all.

THE FLOCKMASTER OF POISON CREEK

John Mackenzie trod the trail from Jasper to the great sheep country where fortunes were being made by the flock-masters. Shepherding was not a peaceful pursuit in those bygone days. Adventure met him at every turn—there is a girl of course—men fight their best fights for a woman—it is an epic of the sheeplands.

THE LAND OF LAST CHANCE

Jim Timberlake and Capt. David Scott waited with restless thousands on the Oklahoma line for the signal to dash across the border. How the city of Victory arose overnight on the plains, how people savagely defended their claims against the "sooners;" how good men and bad played politics, makes a strong story of growth and American initiative.

TRAIL'S END

Ascalon was the end of the trail for thirsty cowboys who gave vent to their pent-up feelings without restraint. Calvin Morgan was not concerned with its wickedness until Seth Craddock's malevolence directed itself against him. He did not emerge from the maelstrom until he had obliterated every vestige of lawlessness, and assured himself of the safety of a certain dark-eyed girl.

Ask for Complete free list of G. & D. Popular Copyrighted Fiction

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER'S WESTERN NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list.

THE WAY OF THE BUFFALO

Jim Cameron builds a railroad adjacent to Ballantine's property, even though Ballantine threatens to kill him the day he runs it.

BRASS COMMANDMENTS

Stephen Lannon writes six commandments over six loaded cartridges set out where the evil men who threaten him and the girl he loves, may see them.

WEST!

When Josephine Hamilton went West to visit Betty, she met "Satan" Lattimer, ruthless, handsome, fascinating, who taught her some things.

SQUARE DEAL SANDERSON

Square Deal Sanderson rode onto the Double A just as an innocent man was about to be hanged and Mary Bransford was in danger of losing her property.

"BEAU" RAND

Bristling with quick, decisive action, and absorbing in its love theme, "Beau" Rand, mirrors the West of the hold-up days in remarkable fashion.

THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y

Calumet Marston, daredevil, returns to his father's ranch to find it is being run by a young woman who remains in charge until he accepts sundry conditions.

"DRAG" HARLAN

Harlan establishes himself as the protector of Barbara Morgan and deals out punishment to the girl's enemies through the lightning flash of drawn guns.

THE TRAIL HORDE

How Kane Lawler fought the powerful interests that were trying to crush him and Ruth Hamlin, the woman he loved, makes intensely interesting reading.

THE RANCHMAN

The story of a two-fisted product of the west, pitted against a rascally spoilsman, who sought to get control of Marion Harlan and her ranch.

"FIREBRAND" TREVISON

The encroachment of the railroad brought Rosalind Benham—and also results in a clash between Corrigan and "Firebrand" that ends when the better man wins.

THE RANGE BOSS

Ruth Harkness comes West to the ranch her uncle left her. Rex Randerson, her range boss, rescues her from a mired buckboard, and is in love with her from that moment on.

THE VENGEANCE OF JEFFERSON GAWNE

A story of the Southwest that tells how the law came to a cow-town, dominated by a cattle thief. There is a wonderful girl too, who wins the love of Jefferson Gawne.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

JACKSON GREGORY'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list.

DAUGHTER OF THE SUN

A tale of Aztec treasure—of American adventurers, who seek it—of Zoraida, who hides it.

TIMBER-WOLF

This is a story of action and of the wide open, dominated always by the heroic figure of Timber-Wolf.

THE EVERLASTING WHISPER

The story of a strong man's struggle against savage nature and humanity, and of a beautiful girl's regeneration from a spoiled child of wealth into a courageous strong-willed woman.

DESERT VALLEY

A college professor sets out with his daughter to find gold. They meet a rancher who loses his heart, and becomes involved in a feud.

MAN TO MAN

How Steve won his game and the girl he loved, is a story filled with breathless situations.

THE BELLS OF SAN JUAN

Dr. Virginia Page is forced to go with the sheriff on a night journey into the strongholds of a lawless band.

JUDITH OF BLUE LAKE RANCH

Judith Sanford part owner of a cattle ranch realizes she is being robbed by her foreman. With the help of Bud Lee, she checkmates Trevor's scheme.

THE SHORT CUT

Wayne is suspected of killing his brother after a quarrel. Financial complications, a horse-race and beautiful Wanda, make up a thrilling romance.

THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER

A reporter sets up housekeeping close to Beatrice's Ranch much to her chagrin. There is "another man" who complicates matters.

SIX FEET FOUR

Beatrice Waverly is robbed of $5,000 and suspicion fastens upon Buck Thornton, but she soon realizes he is not guilty.

WOLF BREED

No Luck Drennan, a woman hater and sharp of tongue, finds a match in Ygerne whose clever fencing wins the admiration and love of the "Lone Wolf."

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD'S

STORIES OF ADVENTURE

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

THE COUNTRY BEYOND

THE FLAMING FOREST

THE VALLEY OF SILENT MEN

THE RIVER'S END

THE GOLDEN SNARE

NOMADS OF THE NORTH

KAZAN

BAREE, SON OF KAZAN

THE COURAGE OF CAPTAIN PLUM

THE DANGER TRAIL

THE HUNTED WOMAN

THE FLOWER OF THE NORTH

THE GRIZZLY KING

ISOBEL

THE WOLF HUNTERS

THE GOLD HUNTERS

THE COURAGE OF MARGE O'DOONE

BACK TO GOD'S COUNTRY

Ask for Complete free list of G. & D. Popular Copyrighted Fiction

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

EDGAR RICE BURROUGH'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list

BANDIT OF HELL'S BEND, THE

CAVE GIRL, THE

LAND THAT TIME FORGOT, THE

TARZAN AND THE ANT MEN

TARZAN AND THE GOLDEN LION

TARZAN THE TERRIBLE

TARZAN THE UNTAMED

JUNGLE TALES OF TARZAN

AT THE EARTH'S CORE

THE MUCKER

A PRINCESS OF MARS

THE GODS OF MARS

THE WARLORD OF MARS

THUVIA, MAID OF MARS

THE CHESSMEN OF MARS

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

ZANE GREY'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list.

THE CALL OF THE CANYON
WANDERER OF THE WASTELAND
TO THE LAST MAN
THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER
THE MAN OF THE FOREST
THE DESERT OF WHEAT
THE U. P. TRAIL
WILDFIRE
THE BORDER LEGION
THE RAINBOW TRAIL
THE HERITAGE OF THE DESERT
RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE
THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS
THE LAST OF THE PLAINSMEN
THE LONE STAR RANGER
DESERT GOLD
BETTY ZANE
THE DAY OF THE BEAST

* * * * * * *

LAST OF THE GREAT SCOUTS

The life story of "Buffalo Bill" by his sister Helen Cody Wetmore, with Foreword and conclusion by Zane Grey.

ZANE GREY'S BOOKS FOR BOYS

KEN WARD IN THE JUNGLE
THE YOUNG LION HUNTER
THE YOUNG FORESTER
THE YOUNG PITCHER
THE SHORT STOP
THE RED-HEADED OUTFIELD AND OTHER BASEBALL STORIES

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

BOOTH TARKINGTON'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

THE MIDLANDER

THE FASCINATING STRANGER

GENTLE JULIA

ALICE ADAMS

RAMSEY MILHOLLAND

THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

THE TWO VAN REVELS

THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

MONSIEUR BEAUCAIRE

SEVENTEEN

PENROD

PENROD AND SAM

THE TURMOIL

THE GENTLEMAN FROM INDIANA

THE FLIRT

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

KATHLEEN NORRIS' STORIES

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list

SISTERS. Frontispiece by Frank Street.

The California Redwoods furnish the background for this beautiful story of sisterly devotion and sacrifice.

POOR, DEAR, MARGARET KIRBY.

Frontispiece by George Gibbs.

A collection of delightful stories, including "Bridging the Years" and "The Tide-Marsh." This story is now shown in moving pictures.

JOSSELYN'S WIFE. Frontispiece by C. Allan Gilbert.

The story of a beautiful woman who fought a bitter fight for happiness and love.

MARTIE, THE UNCONQUERED.

Illustrated by Charles E. Chambers.

The triumph of a dauntless spirit over adverse conditions.

THE HEART OF RACHAEL.

Frontispiece by Charles E. Chambers.

An interesting story of divorce and the problems that come with a second marriage.

THE STORY OF JULIA PAGE.

Frontispiece by C. Allan Gilbert.

A sympathetic portrayal of the quest of a normal girl, obscure and lonely, for the happiness of life.

SATURDAY'S CHILD. Frontispiece by F. Graham Cootes.

Can a girl, born in rather sordid conditions, lift herself through sheer determination to the better things for which her soul hungered?

MOTHER. Illustrated by F. C. Yohn.

A story of the big mother heart that beats in the background of every girl's life, and some dreams which came true.

Ask for Complete free list of G. & D. Popular Copyrighted Fiction

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

NOVELS OF FRONTIER LIFE

WILLIAM MAC LEOD RAINE

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list

BIG-TOWN ROUND-UP, THE

BRAND BLOTTERS

BUCKY O'CONNOR

CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT

DAUGHTER OF THE DONS, A

DESERT'S PRICE, THE

FIGHTING EDGE, THE

GUNSIGHT PASS

HIGHGRADER, THE

IRONHEART

MAN FOUR-SQUARE, A

MAN-SIZE

MAVERICKS

OH, YOU TEX!

PIRATE OF PANAMA, THE

RIDGWAY OF MONTANA

SHERIFF'S SON, THE

STEVE YEAGER

TANGLED TRAILS

TEXAS RANGER, A

VISION SPLENDID, THE

WYOMING

YUKON TRAIL, THE

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

THE NOVELS OF
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

DANGEROUS DAYS.

A brilliant story of married life. A romance of fine purpose and stirring appeal.

THE AMAZING INTERLUDE.

Illustrations by The Kinneys.

The story of a great love which cannot be pictured—an interlude—amazing, romantic.

LOVE STORIES.

This book is exactly what its title indicates, a collection of love affairs—sparkling with humor, tenderness and sweetness.

"K." Illustrated.

K. LeMoyne, famous surgeon, goes to live in a little town where beautiful Sidney Page lives. She is in training to become a nurse. The joys and troubles of their young love are told with keen and sympathetic appreciation.

THE MAN IN LOWER TEN.

Illustrated by Howard Chandler Christy.

An absorbing detective story woven around the mysterious death of the "Man in Lower Ten."

WHEN A MAN MARRIES.

Illustrated by Harrison Fisher and Mayo Bunker.

A young artist, whose wife had recently divorced him, finds that his aunt is soon to visit him. The aunt, who contributes to the family income, knows nothing of the domestic upheaval. How the young man met the situation is entertainingly told.

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE. Illustrated by Lester Ralph.

The occupants of "Sunnyside" find the dead body of Arnold Armstrong on the circular staircase. Following the murder a bank failure is announced. Around these two events is woven a plot of absorbing interest.

THE STREET OF SEVEN STARS. (Photoplay Edition.)

Harmony Wells, studying in Vienna to be a great violinist, suddenly realizes that her money is almost gone. She meets a young ambitious doctor who offers her chivalry and sympathy, and together with world-worn Dr. Anna and Jimmie, the waif, they share their love and slender means.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

THE NOVELS OF TEMPLE BAILEY

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

"Although my ancestry is all of New England, I was born in the old town of Petersburg, Virginia. I went later to Richmond and finally at the age of five to Washington, D. C., returning to Richmond for a few years in a girl's school, which was picturesquely quartered in General Lee's mansion.

PEACOCK FEATHERS

The eternal conflict between wealth and love. Jerry, the idealist who is poor, loves Mimi, a beautiful, spoiled society girl.

THE DIM LANTERN

The romance of little Jane Barnes who is loved by two men.

THE GAY COCKADE

Unusual short stories where Miss Bailey shows her keen knowledge of character and environment, and how romance comes to different people.

THE TRUMPETER SWAN

Randy Paine comes back from France to the monotony of every-day affairs. But the girl he loves shows him the beauty in the common-place.

THE TIN SOLDIER

A man who wishes to serve his country, but is bound by a tie he cannot in honor break—that's Derry. A girl who loves him, shares his humiliation and helps him to win—that's Jean. Their love is the story.

MISTRESS ANNE

A girl in Maryland teaches school, and believes that work is worthy service. Two men come to the little community; one is weak, the other strong, and both need Anne.

CONTRARY MARY

An old-fashioned love story that is nevertheless modern.

GLORY OF YOUTH

A novel that deals with a question, old and yet ever new—how far should an engagement of marriage bind two persons who discover they no longer love.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

MARGARET PEDLER'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

RED ASHES

A gripping story of a doctor who failed in a crucial operation—and had only himself to blame. Could the woman he loved forgive him?

THE BARBARIAN LOVER

A love story based on the creed that the only important things between birth and death are the courage to face life and the love to sweeten it.

THE MOON OUT OF REACH

Nan Davenant's problem is one that many a girl has faced—her own happiness or her father's bond.

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

How a man and a woman fulfilled a gypsy's strange prophecy.

THE HERMIT OF FAR END

How love made its way into a walled-in house and a walled-in heart.

THE LAMP OF FATE

The story of a woman who tried to take all and give nothing.

THE SPLENDID FOLLY

Do you believe that husbands and wives should have no secrets from each other?

THE VISION OF DESIRE

An absorbing romance written with all that sense of feminine tenderness that has given the novels of Margaret Pedler their universal appeal.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

THE NOVELS OF
GRACE LIVINGSTON HILL
(MRS. LUTZ)

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list

BEST MAN, THE
CITY OF FIRE, THE
CLOUDY JEWEL
DAWN OF THE MORNING
ENCHANTED BARN, THE
EXIT BETTY
FINDING OF JASPER HOLT, THE
GIRL FROM MONTANA, THE
LO, MICHAEL!
MAN OF THE DESERT, THE
MARCIA SCHUYLER
MIRANDA
MYSTERY OF MARY, THE
OBSESSION OF VICTORIA GRACEN, THE
PHOEBE DEANE
RED SIGNAL, THE
SEARCH, THE
STORY OF A WHIM, THE
TOMORROW ABOUT THIS TIME
TRYST, THE
VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS, A
WITNESS, THE

Ask for Complete free list of G. & D. Popular Copyrighted Fiction

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

ELEANOR H. PORTER'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

JUST DAVID

The tale of a loveable boy and the place he comes to fill in the hearts of the gruff farmer folk to whose care he is left.

THE ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING

A compelling romance of love and marriage.

OH, MONEY! MONEY!

Stanley Fulton, a wealthy bachelor, to test the dispositions of his relatives, sends them each a check for $100,000, and then as plain John Smith comes among them to watch the result of his experiment.

SIX STAR RANCH

A wholesome story of a club of six girls and their summer on Six Star Ranch.

DAWN

The story of a blind boy whose courage leads him through the gulf of despair into a final victory gained by dedicating his life to the service of blind soldiers.

ACROSS THE YEARS

Short stories of our own kind and of our own people Contains some of the best writing Mrs. Porter has done

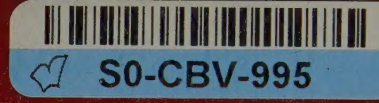
THE TANGLED THREADS

In these stories we find the concentrated charm and tenderness of all her other books.

THE TIE THAT BINDS

Intensely human stories told with Mrs. Porter's wonderful talent for warm and vivid character drawing.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK


S0-CBV-995